

# The Myth of Shadowrun

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Summary: The continuing adventures of our heroes in the fantasy world of Aradain, Book II in The Legends and Myths Chronicles. A new and deadly power is unleashed as Jessie begins having disturbing nightmares and both she and James must fight for their souls.

## 1. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> The Myth of Shadowrun

The Myth of Shadowrun

Book two in the Legends and Myths Chronicles by Mystic Vapoleon

Chapter 1: Events set in Motion

Darkness ensues where it finds suitable. Sometimes it is unexpected, and without warning, other times, it is welcomed, as the epitome of human agony reaches its peak. It can be frightening, or relief after something even more devastating than itself in its own. On the rare occasion, the inky blackness can be the worst torture that a soul can experience. The type of psyche associated with this unmitigated fear of the dark, is one who has been castigated by its wrath many times, and who's greatest fear of all, is the smite of it once again.

She sat in the pitch black of the cell, the dead silence the only thing present in her mind. It was blank, no thoughts crossed it, no feelings nor emotions. The dark encircled her, wrapped its thick blanket tightly about her body, choking her until her chest felt as if were about to burst. She dared not move, any sound would be most unwelcome in her ears which had only held the rings of screams of agony and terror for ages. Her stomach twisted in terror for no apparent reason as her brain slowly began to function again. Her vision sparkled with white points of light as she hauled herself to her feet. "Why can't I see?" she said to herself, her human mind

working itself into a panic.

She spun around and quickly dashed the other way, only to collide roughly with the wall, splitting the bridge of her nose open on the rough stones. She cried out in pain and clasped her battered and bleeding hands over yet another wound. "No!" she wailed tears springing quickly to her eyes. She could feel the hot blood pouring over the fingers and down her cheeks, the facial wound bleeding more so than her hands. She wiped it away furiously and cleaned her hands quickly on her leg. "How long have I been here? What happened?" she asked aloud.

She couldn't even remember, or see for that matter, what she was wearing. She hadn't really been in her body, her mind had wandered, trying to escape the pain. Her breath grew short, her chest heaving as she gasped for air. Her head spun with dizziness and she sunk to her knees. "My head hurts," she muttered and collapsed to the ground. Pounding sounded in her head in rapid succession; her heart beat. A knoll in the silence that again enveloped her.

She shrieked in terror as she felt her hand being gripped tightly. Her head snapped up and she found herself staring into the woeful eyes of a young man. She gasped at the sight of him and sprung to her feet, despite the pain that now shot through her entire body. A small light shone on his mangled body, blood seeping from a countless number of wounds. His eyes, glazed with pain, looked up at her, begging for comfort. She backed away, screaming in terror. "No! No!" she wailed repeatedly until her sore back collided with cold metal. The man reached out to her, blood dripping from his outstretched fingers, the hand itself torn and bleeding. "Please make this stop!" the girl cried, tears mingling with the blood sliding down her face. She closed her eyes and the man spoke in a clear voice, and she wailed harder as she realized who it was, and where she was. He looked straight through her eyes with his piercing green ones, the unmistakable trait of her best friend. "Jessie Help me"

Jessie sat bolt upright in bed screaming as loud as her lungs would allow. She quickly ran out of breath and sat with her hand pressed against her heaving chest, sweat pouring down her forehead. She quickly put a hand to her nose, which still felt as if it was split and bleeding, but when no blood came off of it, she realized she'd awakened from the dream. Her door flung open and James, still clad in baggy nightclothes, leapt through it. "Jessie! What happened? What's wrong?" he asked diving quickly next to her. She relaxed a little and sunk into the safety of his arms. "Oh god, James," she whispered beginning to cry.

James could do nothing but hold her until the sobs that wracked her body had somewhat quelled. "Jessie please, you can tell me," he soothed, running his hand through her tangled red hair. "I had that dream again," she whispered hoarsely through her sobs. James softened and pulled her away from his body to look into her eyes. "You mean, the prison one?" he asked fearfully. She nodded and wiped the tears from her cheeks quickly.

James looked upward, hiding his sorrowful expression from his friend. "I've been having it again too," he whispered, tears sliding silently down his cheeks as well. "Oh James," Jessie breathed wrapping her arms around his neck. He laid down onto the soft bed with her and closed his eyes. "Go back to sleep Jessie," he whispered to her. "I'm

afraid to," she replied wrapping her long tail around her waist for comfort. "It was only a nightmare. If you have it again, I'll be right here when you wake up," James promised. Finally satisfied, Jessie slid her eyes shut as fell asleep with James' soft rhythmic breathing.

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"It sure is a great morning isn't it Pikachu?" "It certainly is Ash, and it feels incredibly good to be able to answer intelligently instead with my typical, uneducated "Pika!" " The Pokemon answered crossing his eyes comically at the mention of his old cry. Ash laughed. "You've got a great personality! I feel like I know you like ten times better now that you can talk!" he mused. "Perhaps you don't want to know my real personality," Pikachu said smiling deviously. Yes, Ash enjoyed the lighthearted and generally happy mood of his friend as they strolled in the immense gardens of the castle. They had been living there peacefully for the past few months, and nothing adverse had affected the placidity of their life. Yet.

"So Riley, what about this next scroll? Which one will open next?" Misty asked nervously as she held the candle over the ancient yellowed paper. "I can't read worth squat down here, all I've managed to get is that there's an order in which they will open, and specific events trigger it, like the moons from your scroll," the dragon replied, his brow furrowing with frustration. "I can barely see these damn things, much less make out any writing, let's take them outside!" Misty said motioning to the door. "I don't wanna get into a scrap with the Princess's stupid mutt again! You know she wants to keep them down here!" Riley protested wincing in remembrance. Misty couldn't help but giggle when she remembered the time Riley had attempted to take a scroll to the courtyard against Cerise's rule, her pet Maamut, also her favorite Pokemon, had made short work of the dragon.

"I'll deal with Cerise, stuck up little brat," Misty promised and gathered the scrolls. Riley hopped on her shoulder. "Say, can I have your dessert tonight when she murders you?" "Not on your life lizard," Misty winked as they exited the dark room of history. She whistled a tune she'd once heard somewhere in Vertigo as she entered the banquet hall. Breakfast had not yet been set, and Misty frowned at the bare table. "Aw shoot, I wanted a Caracass fruit!" she whined. Ever since she had eaten them at Master Lotus's adobe house by the sea, they'd become one of her favorite foods. "You can get one later, c'mon! I wanna read the scrolls!" Riley said digging his claws into the girl's scaly shoulder. She rolled her eyes and swatted him lightly with a scroll. "I'm going to check the kitchen, I'm hungry now, and I can't help on an empty stomach!" "You can't help! You can't read the ancient script!" Misty ignored the enraged dragon's calls and proceeded through the double doors to the immense white kitchen.

"Oh hello Misty! A Caracass fruit is what you crave I see!" the rotund, yet cheerful head chef called from behind the counter where he stood slicing it for the morning meal. "Just one to hold me until your fabulous food!" she replied. The cook tossed the bright green object her way, and she caught it in the makeshift basket her webbed claws made. "Thanks!" she called and took off running for the fountain in the courtyard.

Riley clung on for dear life as she picked up speed, and burst

through the double doors of the main entrance. "Slow down! Whoa mermaid! Easy girl!" he called. She only laughed, coming to a skidding halt in front of the fountain bearing her likeness. Riley shrieked as he lost his footing with the momentum and slid off of Misty's shoulder into the cold water with a neat splash. Misty smiled and leaned over the rough stone edge of the round fountain. "Have a nice swim Riley?" she asked as he burst to the surface gasping for air. "I hate water! I hate it! Especially wet water!" he cried dragging himself onto the rim of the circular inlaid stone basin. Misty smiled victoriously, took a large bite out of the ripe fruit and sat down to examine the scrolls.

Jessie's eyes fluttered open as a thin ray of sunlight from her slightly parted curtains fell across them. She could still sense James' soft breathing behind her and his arms around her waist, even though she was dimly aware of her own senses. Temporarily forgetting the night's events, she yawned broadly and turned over. James drew in a deep breath raspy with sleep and slid one eye open groggily. "Morning," Jessie whispered gently brushing a mass of cerulean hair away from his eyes. He groaned and jammed his head under the pillow at the steadily increasing light in the room. "You never were a morning person," Jessie mused as she quietly slipped out of bed. "What time is it?" James' reply came muffled by fabric and feathers.

Jessie decided he needed to be awakened and tapped him on the shoulder lightly. "Oh James?" she called sweetly. He swatted her hand away, but instead of leaving as he had wished, it came to rest on the edge of the blankets atop the bed. "Get up!" she cried sharply and flung them off her companion. He shrieked in protest but the red haired youth didn't stop there. She held them back as she used her marginally developed psychic powers to meekly draw back the curtains, letting the golden sunlight of morning fill the room. She snatched the pillow from his head and he squeezed his eyes shut harder against the unwelcome sensation.

"Jess that really hurts!" he complained in genuine agony. "You'll get used to it Dracula," Jessie replied and went to her closet to retrieve a clean tunic, pants and her leather boots. "Cerise hates it that I dress this way," she mused and threw her clothes on the end of her bed. James sat up now, looking at her with a furrowed brow. "What?" Jessie asked, irked. "Are you okay now?" he asked innocently. Jessie's face softened and she nodded. "Yeah, thanks for staying with me," she said timidly. "Anything for you," James replied and stood up. "Best go get dressed for breakfast, the Princess won't be pleased if we're late," he announced. "Why don't we be late? I like bugging her," Jessie replied smugly.

James smiled at her, radiant in the early sunshine and good spirits. He looked away to distract from his dreamy expression and nodded. "Fashionably late of course," he said hinting at the old value of beauty they held while in Team Rocket. He still valued it of course, but the arrogant vainness had gone. "Absolutely," Jessie said. There was a long quiet as the two friends stood there looking at each other. "I do need to get dressed James," Jessie finally said. James blushed and fingered a tail feather nervously. "Oh, sorry, meet you at the fountain, then we can goof off," he said and exited the room with a smile.

He paused at the door, resisting the urge to open it, wishing he

could've stayed. He cursed himself again for loving her and walked to his room. Once there he quickly shed his nightclothes and picked up the outfit he'd been wearing the previous day. He, unlike Jessie, kept his room in an organized mess. "Now, I know I have a clean tunic here somewhere," he muttered sifting through his laundry. He managed to unearth one boot and the pair of pants he'd set aside especially because he knew for a fact they were clean. He finally gave up and went to his closet, ironically as a last resort. He opened it swiftly, and nothing but a few wire hangers jingling with the breeze of his open window greeted him. He scowled and looked to the bottom of the wooden compartment to find a singular white tunic laying crumpled on the floor.

He reached down and picked it up, also revealing his missing boot. It was one of his favorites, loose and casual looking, the neckline looking as if it were a v line once, but then broken to form two ninety degree angles of fabric. It laced delicately at the top, but he never bothered with that, it looked nice with the crisscrosses of cord across his chest. "Wonder if it's clean," he said to himself jammed his nose into the soft folds of it. He smiled and nodded. "Yep, clean," he said satisfied at last with his attire. He closed the window and promptly changed.

Once he had done so, he decided it might be nice to fly down to the fountain from his room at the very top of the Easternmost tower of the castle. He reopened the window and looked out to see Jessie chatting happily with Misty who had already been there. The two women had become quite good friends over the few months they'd been there, often talking together and having sleepovers like young girls. James often wondered if Jessie ever talked about him, because he had entrusted Ash with his secret love for her, and he was the only one he had told about it. After all he had seen him kiss her, and confess his love, what was he supposed to do? Tell the kid it was all a lie said just to get her back? Ash was smarter than that, he knew.

James sighed and felt his cheeks to ensure they weren't burning with embarrassment and spread his wings. After sharing a bed intended for one person with Jessie the previous night, they were cramped and stiff, making him restless to take to the skies. He leapt deftly from the window, gliding on the warm updrafts, circling slowly downwards. Jessie shielded her eyes from the light, looked up, and smiled as he drifted lazily downwards. "Hello James!" she called cheerfully as he lighted in front of them. He bowed comically and both girls rolled their eyes.

As James stepped over, he noticed a sopping wet and bedraggled looking Riley asleep next to Misty. "What happened to him?" he asked pointing. "Small accident, he'll be alright," she said grinning deviously. Jessie and James looked at each other and shrugged. "Jess! James! Misty! Da best part a' da day! Breakfast!" all turned to see Meowth bound out of the main doorway to the palace. "Come on!" he said stopping in front of them. Misty stood up, gathering the scrolls and followed the cat as he scampered enthusiastically back into their home. Misty stopped halfway there when she realized neither Jessie nor James followed her example. "You guys coming?" she asked.

Jessie smiled and raised an eyebrow at James. "What do you say we take a spontaneous one day vacation?" she asked standing up. James smiled back and put his arm across her shoulders. "I'd say you were brilliant," he answered. Jessie indicated to their friend that they

would not be present at breakfast and they strolled nonchalantly towards the main gate. "Those two," Misty mused shaking her head after them. They were obviously the best of friends, but Misty could see something else there. Perhaps it was just her overly romantic brain working double time, but she was firmly convinced of her suspicions. "I wonder why they haven't gotten together yet."

James and Jessie chatted happily as they walked along the dirt path leading into the forest. "Where exactly are we going?" James asked. Jessie simply shrugged in response, pausing her speaking to examine the brightly colored foliage that adorned what seemed like every inch of the forest. It was thick, and there were other events going on in the forest, but both friends were oblivious to them. They didn't notice the boot marks or the broken disheveled branches of various trees and bushes. "I hate to say this, but I'm hungry," James said sheepishly, fully expecting Jessie to smack him senseless. She smiled as he flinched when she turned to face him. "Here," she said and tapped him lightly on the shoulder, "there's your beating for the day, mustn't let old traditions die can we?" James smiled as they turned back to get some late breakfast.

Cerise was not pleased with them upon their return, but they ignored her as usual and the day passed by uneventfully, until that night.

Sweat poured down James' forehead as he tossed about in bed, his psyche assaulted by his horrible reoccurring nightmare. In it, he was locked deep in a black dungeon, pain searing his back from an unknown source. Tears and blood streamed down the sides of his face as he cried out in pain over and over again. He'd had it ever since he and Jessie had run away from team Rocket fearing for their lives, and barely escaped with them, he himself having the most luck. He most likely should have not been alive at that point. The pain in his hand, his right one, was unbearable. He'd tried uselessly to defend himself with that hand, but the glint of the dagger as it descended toward him blinded him momentarily. Then there was pain again. The feverish nightmare exploded into a flash of light as he awoke, opening his emerald green eyes to end the terror.

He cried out in fear, but stopped as he realized someone was holding him. His heart beat remained quick, and his breath came in short gasps as his conscious mind was slow to realize it was no longer dreaming. He stopped the panic and forced himself to look at who it was. Jessie put a finger to his trembling lips and laid him gently back down. "It's okay James, you had it again I assume?" she asked gently. He drew in a deep breath and smoothed his damp blue hair away from his face, keeping his hands on his forehead. He tenderly rubbed his temples, squeezing his eyes shut as if it hurt. "I'm going to have to kill myself fairly soon, either that or die from lack of sleep," he muttered his eyes sliding shut again.

Jessie brushed a strand of hair James had missed away from his closed lids and smiled vaguely. "I had mine again too, mind if I stay?" Jessie muttered her voice cracking. She looked away sharply and wiped at her eyes furiously. James sat up at this point and touched her shoulder tenderly. "You're crying again, what's wrong?" he asked, concerned. She looked balefully at him, her crystalline azure eyes wet with tears. James practically melted, they looked positively stunning in the pale silvery green moonlight.

"It's getting more real every time, tonightIt was worse, I held you in my arms untilUntil you were gone," she sobbed burying her face into her hands. James cradled her gently in his arms for the second night in a row. "It's alright Jessie, we both made it, we may have a few scars to prove the hell we went through, but my hand is perfectly fine now, and we're totally free, both of us," he soothed. "I know, it's just that, when we were there, I thought for sure you were going to die. That scared me James, I don't know what I'd do if I lost you," she whispered. James ran his hand through her hair and held her closer, remembering what had happened. Jessie too, as she clung closer to her best friend, recalled the events that had led to their mutual traumas.

They'd been beaten, again, but this time, Giovanni had decided it was the final offense. They were both taken down to a deep dungeon, and beaten severely. James had resisted, while Jessie had not, knowing that it was futile. They'd forced her to watch as two burly guards had overpowered him. James had the extreme disadvantage, being on the small thin side, and unarmed. Large hunting knives had resulted in the torn and bleeding hand from her dream. The assault had nearly taken his life, and to add insult to injury, unbeknownst to Jessie, they'd forced him to watch, bleeding and weak, as they had whipped her. Then they'd thrown them both into a dark cell and left them for dead. Jessie had cared for her friend, praying he wouldn't leave her, but it seemed that he was not long for this world, and he nearly did die. His hand had been the worst, she'd barely been able to look at it, it was so mangled. When Meowth had finally rescued them, he'd nearly lost it at the hospital, but the skilled doctors saved it and him.

James finally sat up, his vision blurring with white points of light. He moved his scarred hand just to ensure it was still there and not in pain, the memory of his injury causing it feel slashed again. "I'm definitely not sleeping again," he muttered. "Me either," Jessie answered. "Go for a walk?" James offered. Jessie sat up and nodded. "I'll go get dressed," she said getting up, but James grabbed her wrist. She turned back to face him and shot him an inquisitive look. "Let's just go in pajamas," he said smiling cheerfully. Jessie chuckled slightly at him, even though all he'd been through, he hadn't changed a bit. "Sure," she answered, and they walked arm in arm down to the courtyard.

They strolled silently out along the same path they had the previous morning, James stretching his wings the whole way. He'd slept on them in an odd fashion that night and they were bothering him. "These are a blast to have during the day, but they're a pain to sleep with," James whined as he fluttered them lightly one last time before putting them back into place. "Wish I had got the power of flight," Jessie mused tugging on one playfully. James smiled at her. "Perhaps someday you can fly with me," he whispered under his breath. "Hmm? Say something?" she replied. He felt his stomach twist. "Uh, II didn't say anything" he muttered nervously. Jessie shrugged and they continued walking.

"Sir! Two people walking, one male, and one female, pretty freaky looking if ya ask me and-" he was cut off by a swift arrow in his chest. "Never did like him," a gruff voice muttered. He rose from his seat and strode briskly to the door of his tent, peering through the folds of fabric at the immense military camp sprawling before him. Vinetra had given him a larger budget, and he'd been able to kindly'

recruit new soldiers. Those kids that had escaped a few months back had disturbed her a bit. Afraid that word of the seven messengers' return would spread and cause more resistance, she'd hired him to crush one of the smaller annoying towns not loyal to her. His target lay not too far beyond his current residence, nestled in a remote part of the low mountain ranges near the coast of the Neonthian sea.

"Captain Eratus Sir! I assume you've killed another lackey in spite?" his thin, bony second in command officer said as he crept from his tent. "Rill, this is not of concern to me whatever his business was, besides he annoyed me," the captain said gruffly. Rill grinned and crossed his arms across his chest. "Oh but it is sir, he told me before you slaughtered him and I believe you'd be quite interested," he said smugly. "Don't be coy with me, I am your superior," Eratus snapped back, glaring at his officer with one eye, the other's grotesque features hidden by a patch.

Rill smiled even broader and produced a small blue feather from his pocket. "I believe you recognize this?" he asked. Eratus' eye widened and he snatched it from his grip. "The blue feather of the man your dead minion saw in the woods," Rill said triumphantly. "Send our best assassin to fetch them, I'd like to have a word with the lot. And if a single feather or whatever the other one has is out of place, I'll fry his scalp and feed it to the Doggesh!" he snapped and swept back into his tent. "Righto sir," Rill replied in his strange accept quite similar to that of the British. He saluted in mockery at the cynical old captain and crept stealthily. The thud of the body as it landed outside on the ground was enough to make him shudder, but the sound of it being torn apart by the hoards of dog-like Pokemon they kept for protection nearly made him retch.

Nightwing also heard the sound from his tent. Being the camps most accurate archer and inconspicuous member, his hearing was forced to be acute. He peered cautiously around the flap of his tent and his forehead met the cold metal of the arrow loaded into the crossbow he knew had been there. "Well Rill, I see you have another assignment for me," he said coolly. "I hate you Nightwing, you hate me, let's just cooperate shall we?" he spat derisively. Nightwing examined a perfect fingernail carefully, ran his hand through his long jet-black hair thoughtfully and muttered something incoherent to himself. "Take much longer and I won't hesitate to put an arrow in your skull, bastard," Rill seethed. "Fine alright I'll do it, what's the mission Mr. Cranky pants?" Nightwing asked. "Address me as sir peon!" Rill scowled practically foaming at the mouth. "Touchy touchy, let's just tell me so bad ol' Nightwing can get out of your bony face!" he replied smugly.

Rill slammed the crossbow onto the ground, activating it and sending an arrow through Nightwing's tent into a nearby tree. "Whatever! You are to go into the forest and find two people, one has a tan tail and cat ears, the other has wings. Apprehend them, and bring them back unharmed! Do you hear me? Unharmed! Leave immediately, that is all," he said aristocratically. He huffed and scooped the broken crossbow from the ground, storming off. "Heh, pissing him off is so much fun," Nightwing mused and walked lightly back into his tent to get ready for his newest game.

Hours and countless preparations later, the nearly invisible young man sat in the branches of a tree. He'd found his targets and had



tracked them to arrive at this exact spot any moment now. Even as he readied his trap he heard the cheerful conversation of the two young friends. He rolled his gray eyes visibly. "Lovers, blech," he spat wrinkling his nose at the thought and tightened the rope around the tree.

"You can not!" Jessie said, still smiling, but stopping in the middle of the road. "I can too, just watch me!" James replied. Jessie had insisted that he was a weakling, and couldn't lift her, he begged to differ. "Let's see you do it then!" Jessie said grinning deviously. James bent down and swiftly scooped her from the ground. She yelped in surprise and wrapped her arms around his neck to steady herself. Though he wobbled tremendously with the effort of holding her in a joking manner, he held onto her thin frame. "See? I told you I could-" his sentence was cut off by his loss of balance and both crashed to the ground laughing.

Nightwing took this opportunity to slice the rope holding his trap in place neatly with a sharp dagger. Jessie and James were never aware of what had happened until the expertly hidden board was drawn from underneath them, and they fell headfirst into the black abyss that lay beneath it. James landed on his back, carefully spreading his wings to avoid injuring them and soon felt Jessie atop him. He cried out in pain and quickly shoved her to the side. "Ow! James fold those things back in!" she screeched shoving one. There was a small snap as the shaft of the longest flight feather at the tip of one wing broke against the hard stone wall. James winced in pain and folded his wings carefully back in. Jessie helped him up, brushing the dirt off of his back. "Jessie," he whined reaching down to pick up the fragment of his feather, "look what you made me do!"

Jessie rolled her eyes and flicked it from his grasp. "It'll grow back, are you okay?" she asked curtly. James nodded silently, but looked up as a shadow fell across his vision. Jessie slowly looked up as well, and a scowl marred her face as her eyes met the steely gray ones peering down at her. "Well well, a lovebird with his girlfriend how touching," Nightwing mused. James felt his cheeks run hot with embarrassment and quickly retaliated. "She's not my girlfriend!" he sputtered. The young man simply smiled and drew a small brown pouch from his pouch. "You two are really cute together, really you are, and I hate having to do this to nice couples, but, my hands are tied, I'll make sure they don't kill you in a way that's too painful," he said smiling sadistically.

Jessie and James' eyes widened in fear as he dumped the contents of the pouch into the pit. The silvery power glinted in the moonlight as it drifted down, filling the duo's senses with fatigue. They both coughed as their worlds began to spin and Jessie finally succumbed to it, falling forward onto the ground. James had time to finally see the oppressor's face fully before he fell to his knees, collapsing atop his friend. His vision blurred before he shut his eyes, slipping out of consciousness.

Nightwing leapt down into the pit and held his hands in front of Jessie and James' mouths. He smiled, their mutually shallow breathing indicating his stun powder had worked yet again. Another flawless mission, as always. "Score one for Nightwing, and one for the alliance!" he said victoriously as he bound his new captor's limbs, whistling as he did. When he had managed to get them out of his trap, he reset it, leaving no trace again that it had ever been there. All

he left when he returned to camp with his prize, was a single, broken blue feather.

## 2. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 2: The Resistance

### Chapter 2: The Resistance

"Aaron! Sir! There's been alliance movement sighted by our guards in the forest, two people were reported missing, and the only one who came back is dead," the young man stood proudly in the small hut at the desk of his beloved leader. The older man who sat in the chair, fingered his short, red beard thoughtfully and turned to face his disciple.

He sighed sadly as he gazed upon him, the shoddily crafted armor hardly looking as if it could stand against an alliance soldier, yet the man looked proud to be wearing it. His whole town, ever since the elder had been brutally murdered by a huge vine Dragon, had become obsessed with resisting Vinetra and all she stood for. She had decided to squelch them, taking no chances that they may try to oppose her. They had been a peaceful, neutral town, not deserving of trouble, and now they had been thrown into utter turmoil. "Tell the troops at the edge of the city to be ready, and tell everyone that travel is strictly prohibited until further notice," Aaron said tenderly massaging his temples to ward off the throbbing headache brewing in his skull. "Yes sir," the other man bowed and left.

Aaron slammed a fist down on his desk and gently laid his head down on his hands. "Damn you Vinetra," he muttered before feeling a tender touch on his shoulder. He looked up into the soft brown imploring eyes of his wife, Rhianna. "Aaron dear, why do you do this?" she asked tenderly. Aaron smiled at his wife as he felt a tug on his leg. He looked downward and a small boy leapt into his lap. "I brought Jasper to see you," Rhianna said quietly. "Hi daddy! Why do lock yourself in here all day? You never play with me anymore!" the little boy whined. Aaron ran his hand through his ebony, shoulder length hair and hugged him. "I have important business here, you can play with your friends in town. Why don't you run along, I need to talk to your mother," he said lovingly and gently ushered him out of his office. Jasper sighed, resigned to his fate and walked briskly out into the mid-afternoon sun.

Rhianna looked at her husband sharply. "Why can't you ever make time for him? He is your son," she said. Aaron dipped a long blue feather he'd found in the woods into a shallow ink well and commenced to writing. Rhianna waited, the silence penetrated only by the rough scratching of the sharp quill. "Damn it Aaron!" she finally snapped slamming her hands down on his desk. He jumped and the ink spilled across the document. "Rhianna!" he cried. He took the edge of his shirt, trying to salvage what remained of his writing, but the paper became soft with the moisture, tearing in several places. He sighed and crumpled it, tossing it aside into a corner.

Rhianna scowled at her husband. "I'm sorry, it's not easy trying to lead this and still have a family," he muttered. The woman sat next to him, and wrapped her arms around him lovingly. "I know, I just wish you'd spend some time with him, he needs you," she whispered

kissing his neck. "I wish I really did know him," Aaron thought to himself.

Jasper strolled along the main street of his village, kicking a rock solemnly. He didn't have the heart to tell his mother or father he really didn't have any friends. He was an outcast, often being called a freak for his ability to communicate with birds. He also kept his raven hair cropped shoulder length, and his green eyes stood out from pale skin like emeralds on silk. He kept to himself for the most part avoiding in particular, one boy. "Well if it isn't little Jasper. Why aren't you playing with your little bird friends?" he looked up from the ground to see the person he dreaded most in the world, Jake and his band of cohorts. He felt a moment of terror, but ignored them and continued walking. "Hey! When I'm talkin' to ya, I need a answer!" Jake cried indignantly and shoved the smaller boy to the ground.

Jasper cried out in pain as his elbow split on a sharp cobblestone. "Oh did I hurt you? So sowwy!" Jake wailed in a mocking sing-song voice. Jasper narrowed his eyes at him and slowly pulled himself from the ground. "Why do you hate me so much?" he asked meekly, tending to the blood dripping from his broken skin. "Why? Heh, cause you're a freak! That's why! Good enough for you?" Jake asked harshly shoving him back down with his foot. "Now stay there, and I don't wanna see you get up!" he mused and he and his group walked slowly away laughing spitefully.

Jasper closed his eyes against the dust swirling into his face and blinked the tears welling in his eyes back so they would be unseen. He waited for what seemed like hours before finally dragging himself from the dirt. He looked timidly to where he'd seen Jake disappear and took a hesitant step backward. He shrieked as a blur of red streaked in front of him and lighted on the ground, falling backwards. The red thing in front of him shrieked as well, and Jasper rolled his eyes as he realized who it was. "Tierry, I thought I told you not to sneak up on me like that!" he said addressing the little red bird in front of him with his name.

He gripped at his chest with a crimson wing, panting. "Look kid, I like ya and all, but yer gonna give me a heart attack if this keeps up!" he gasped. Jasper smiled, scooping him up and placing him lightly on his shoulder. "Let's go get some dinner, it'll be dark soon," he said. "Best idea you've had yet kid," Tierry mused adjusting his feathers and Jasper strolled back to his home.

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Light was most unwelcome in James' eyes as he slowly, and quite painfully regained his grip on the world of the living. He squeezed them shut harder in an attempt to ward off the pain, but it did little, so he gave it up. "Look who's finally up," he winced as he heard a spiteful comment from his companion. He groaned loudly at it and covered his eyes with his hands. "Oh god," he breathed rolling over onto his back. "I know, hurts like a bitch huh? My head's still throbbing, and I've been awake for hours. That was some powerful stuff he used," Jessie grumbled wrapping her tail around her waist for comfort.

James commenced to whimpering and Jessie softened her harsh stare at him. She slipped off the hard wooden bunk and brushed his hair away

from his face. "Shhh," she soothed cradling him gently in her arms, just keep your eyes shut and try not to move." James was comforted by her now soft, maternal sounding tone and relaxed, opening his eyes just slightly to look at her. Even through the layers of dirt caked on her face and her tangled, dirty hair, she was still stunning. He cursed himself for what seemed like the millionth time for loving her, and closed his dulled green eyes.

Jessie swallowed hard, this being an all too familiar situation. She remembered the last time James had been in her lap in pain. She looked down to his hand, and for a brief instant, could have sworn she saw exactly what had disturbed her so much in the Team Rocket cell. She could still see James' shredded hand, bound in strips of cloth from her own uniform, tied tightly over the slit wrist. His bedraggled form, sprawled grotesquely across the bunk and her lap, her own uniform stained more so with his blood than hers. To the innocent observer, one would have thought James already dead.

She gasped and looked away sharply. "Something wrong Jessie?" James asked, concerned. She wiped the side of her face and swallowed hard. "No, nothing," she replied. James knew what she'd remembered, and decided it was best to leave it at that. He reached up and tenderly laid a hand on her cheek, stroking it lightly. She smiled and held it there with her own hand, grateful to be feeling it. "You know James, you're my best friend, you know that right?" she said in a quavering voice. James managed to open his eyes with minimal pain and nodded. "So are you, we've been through everything together," he mused. She nodded. "Sometimes I wonder how we made it through, in all respects you should be dead," she said slipping her hand into his and resting them both against his chest.

James sighed and looked up at her. "If it hadn't been for you," he added to her sentence. Jessie had saved his life in more ways than one. "We can make it through this, I know we can, as soon as we both snap out of it, we'll find a way out," Jessie said decisively. James nodded. "And we'll do it together."

\* \* \*

Jasper chased the bits of meat on his plate nonchalantly with his fork, leaning dejectedly on the table. "Jasper sweetie, why don't you eat?" Rhianna asked motioning to the otherwise untouched food. "I dunno, something just feels weird," he whispered quietly. Rhianna leaned over and put a hand to his forehead. "You don't feel hot, is your stomach bothering you?" she asked. Jasper rolled his eyes and flicked a morsel to the floor, where Thierry sat in waiting. "Hey kid, you might not wanna eat but I'm starvin'!" he chirped. The boy ignored the prating of his friend and turned back to his mother.

"No, something in the air, nothing's wrong with me," Jasper insisted. "Uh huh, nothing I haven't heard before young man, off to bed with you," Rhianna said sharply pointing to Jasper's room. "But mom I don't-" "Do as your mother says son," Aaron finally broke his evening long silence to direct his son. Rhianna glared at her husband, and got up to force the boy out of the room. "Come along Jasper," were her only words.

She merely shoved the boy into his room before shutting the door behind her. Jasper heard his mother's voice raise in anger, and her

husband's raise back. There was the sharp sound of flesh against flesh, and then sobbing, and more fighting, and the sobbing wasn't his mother's. He scowled at the bitter feud that had been sparked between his parents and crawled into bed. He buried his head beneath his pillow to drown out the sounds of his life. The one that had turned sour with the murder of his grandfather.

"Whoa nelly! Kid, your mother just decked yer dad a good un!" he heard the excited cry of Thierry from his windowsill. "I know. I hate my life, Thierry, why can't I be a bird like you?" he asked, never shedding a tear over the situation. The muffled voices intensified and he finally sat up, deciding rather than avoid them, to distract himself. "I dunno, geez! Yer folks is gonna give ya a complex or sumthin!" Thierry squawked reeling back at a particularly spiteful shriek. "I don't care, they don't love me, I don't think I'm even their kid," Jasper muttered. Thierry's beady black eyes widened at this comment. "Aw man, they already have!" he wailed hopping down to Jasper's shoulder and patting it with a glossy red wing.

Jasper smiled at his friend. "Naw, just an idea I had, they just never pay attention to me, that's all," he explained. "Birds dun live that long kid, don't take months off my life!" Thierry said exasperatedly. "I'm sleepy, you should be too, don't birds sing at dawn?" Jasper asked yawning and lying down. Thierry tugged the coarse brown covers over his slim figure lovingly and smiled as best he could with a beak. "Yeah, but ya know me kid, I'm a bit different," he explained. Jasper yawned and closed his eyes. "Night Thierry," he whispered. "Night kid," the bird replied and flew off into the night.

He enjoyed the cool night air rushing over his wings as he gazed at the scenery below. It was a serene world, one would never have guessed it was torn apart and divided by such a bitter conflict, and he frowned as he saw the collection of greenish tents in a forest clearing. "Alliance, bah!" he spat and continued on his way

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Ash paced nervously in front of the window of James' room. It was the highest one in the castle, and he had figured he could get the best view from there. "You're sure they're not in the castle?" he asked turning to Meowth who sat solemnly on his friend's bed. "Dey wouldn't just go off like dat neitha. But dey ain't here," he replied. Ash scowled and pounded a fist angrily on the windowsill. "Where could they be? I'm gonna get an ulcer just worrying about them!" he said rubbing his temples lightly. "I'm really worried about em too, dey woulda showed up by now. Something's happened! I know it!" Meowth protested. "But how? How could anyone get in here without us knowing?" Ash asked. "Maybe dey were da ones who left," the cat offered jumping in one swift motion from the bed to the window. "Jessie, James, where are ya?" he moaned quietly under his breath.

Ash fought back tears and petted the feline affectionately. "We'll find them Meowth, we'll find them," he promised. Meowth seemed temporarily satisfied with the response and gently fell, purposely from his perch. "I'm gonna go see if da scrolls say anyting," he announced and padded out of the room. Ash, his interest perked, followed close at his heels.

They ventured down into the dark, musty smelling, old room. Obviously the oldest one there. Ash speculated as to why the castle was built, thinking perhaps it had been constructed to suit the needs of the original messengers, or to worship them. He couldn't understand why anyone would want to worship him or his friends, thinking the stones would be a much more sacred object. "That's it," he thought to himself, remembering the wooden podium Icthsique's crystal now rested on, "it's for the powers, not the messengers."

The boy's interest in the world had not been quelled or abated in any fashion, perhaps even risen substantially by the room, but his confidence in himself had faded. He had been so hopeful when he believed he and his friends would rid the world of its oppression, something he thought was his destiny to achieve. Now he viewed this as yet another thing to lose credit over. He'd failed at Pokemon training, and now he'd be second best at this.

He'd accepted it, and moved on, but it still surfaced now and again. He was forced to beat it down as he entered the room with Meowth. The cat motioned to him with his tail, rolling his eyes at the inky blackness Cerise insisted keeping it in. Ash got the hint and raised a finger to the torches lining the walls. He blew gently and the flame spouted from it, igniting them in a neat line. Ash smiled, he was getting good at that. "Thanks Ash!" Meowth said and hopped onto the altar holding the blue crystal.

He picked up a scroll with a white, and oddly curled shaped, wax seal and looked at it. "Wind," he deducted to himself. "All the wax seals have a symbol representing each one of us, dis one is James," Meowth said and picked up the one with a purple eye seal. "And dis one is Jessie. Maybe one a dem will open soon," he deducted. Ash raised an eyebrow. "What makes you say that?" he asked flicking his tail gently with curiosity. "Well, dat one scroll said each one had their time to open. Misty's did right before she had ta fight Icthsique, and it gave us some clues," Meowth said looking to Ash for consent.

He'd somewhat accepted him as his leader, though he'd never admit it, he needed someone to follow, and Ash seemed like he wanted it. Ash shrugged and took the scrolls from Meowth. "Oh, like, their disappearing is a signal that something's up?" he asked. "Way to go Sherlock, ya figured it out again," the cat answered sarcastically. Ash looked momentarily hurt in the small flash from both the wax seals of the scrolls.

Jessie and James both cried out in pain as they were roughly thrown to the ground at the feet of a large, gruff man seated in an elaborate throne of sorts in the back of his tent. It was set several yards away from the rest of the military camp, their leader obviously disliking the rest of his minions. He adjusted the haphazardly crafted eye patch and slid from the chair, crouching with a loud ruminating of old bones before the duo. He smiled at Jessie and lifted her chin. "Well well, the messengers sure are pretty," he mused. Jessie scowled at him as the end of her tail twitched in contempt.

James gritted his teeth and finally raised his head to look at his captors. Only two official looking men stood in the room, the others were merely guards. The larger man kneeling in front of Jessie, and the scrawny one both wore the formerly starched and orderly, yet now shabby, ivy-green jackets of the alliance. "Alliance, I should've

known," James grumbled. The man who had stood silent in back of the captain now stepped forward and smiled wickedly. "Well boy, resistance fighters aren't welcome in this neck of the woods. Even if you are two of the messengers," the abrasive voice of Rill grated against both friend's minds, sounding like metal being crushed against itself.

"What do you want from us?" Jessie asked spitefully standing swiftly. She narrowed her eyes bitterly at Captain Eratus as they began to glow a dull purple. Rill stooped to help his elderly captain back into his chair and held a hand up to the guards who had raised their spears to defend themselves should anything happen. "Simple young lady, we want the scrolls, and then we want you to die!" Rill answered for the wheezing captain. "Rill! IHandle this! Please turn in for the night," Eratus breathed. Rill looked at him distastefully and opened his mouth to speak. "Now Lieutenant!" Eratus bellowed and the slight man ducked out the folds of the tent swiftly.

Eratus, finally satisfied that the wiry man was gone, turned to his company. "Now, I won't be as threatening as Rill was, but if you hope to see morning, you'll tell me where the scrolls are!" he said raising his voice slightly. "And if we don't?" James asked bitterly. "Then I'm afraid we'll just have to ravage that innocent little town right there over the ridge," Eratus whispered slyly.

James winced, he had often seen the city he spoke of during his annual mid-day flight to stretch his wings. It had seemed like a pleasant peaceful town, not worthy of such carnage, nor deserving. There would be no way they would ever be able to defend themselves against the Alliance army, not even the shoddy, rag-tag bunch he and Jessie had been captured by. "That's just slaughter! You'll barely have to lift a finger! They don't deserve that!" James shouted. He was answered by the blunt end of a staff in the small of his back. "No boy, they're very deserving, they betrayed Vinetra's trust by becoming a resistance town, and now they must pay," Eratus answered. James put a hand to his back and sat up slowly, groaning with pain. Jessie put a hand on his shoulder, but he roughly slid it off, looking away.

When Jessie was sure her friend was alright, she turned back to the captain. "You'll destroy it if we do tell you, you will if we don't! What's the difference!?" she spat. Eratus stood to his full height and barred down at the girl. "The difference is insolent little freak, that if you tell me you escape with your lives, if not, I will think nothing of shooting you with my best crossbow on the spot tomorrow at dawn!" he shouted. Both Jessie and James snarled at him and stood one last time in vengeance. James lowered his emerald green eyes to an abhorrent level and slowly drew on his words. "We'll never tell you," he hissed and they both buckled as the burly guards behind them struck them both in the backs with the staffs.

The captain's eyes bulged as he pointed harshly to the flap opening. "Throw them in the cell! And have two execution arrows ready first thing in the morning!" he screeched and fell back onto his seat. Jessie and James couldn't help but smile at each other as they were roughly dragged across the makeshift dirt path that led back to the tiny cell they had both occupied.

Rill folded back the flap of his tent cautiously, hiding the dull purple glow coming from inside. "Well, so far all goes according to

plan, but master, what if they escape?" he asked closing it abruptly and lacing it. He double knotted the thick cord just in case anyone should see inside of his living quarters.

Rill turned around and smiled warmly at the purple ball glowing furiously on a pedestal at the very center of his tent. It rested on the highest point on the back of a sinewy black cat, claws ferociously bared and digging into the soft earth. The orb pulsated, as if annoyed, and a soft, suave voice answered his questions. "Not to worry, all will go according to my plan, and do make sure you follow through with your end of the deal," it said. Rill held up a jagged dagger he had been cradling in his lap. "I can't wait to do so," he mused, pricking the end of his finger on the blade to ensure it was sharp. "I shall speak to you tomorrow," the orb said abruptly and went dead, a milky white crystal replacing the formerly purple one. "Yes master," Rill droned and wrapped the sheet he had prepared over the pedestal.

He stepped mechanically towards the opening in his tent and undid the lacing, concealing the dagger in his cloak as he did so. "The reign of the new empire starts now," he mumbled as he quietly crept into his captain's tent. He still sat in his throne, asleep with his head resting on the highest portion of it, saliva glistening at the corner of his gaping mouth in the dull candlelight of the area. Rill slowly removed his weapon from the green folds of fabric raising it above his head dramatically. He rolled on the balls of his feet, making no sound in the soft earth as he crept ever closer to Eratus.

He grunted in his sleep and rolled over, mumbling something indecipherable. "Welcome my captain, to the age of Shadow," he said loudly and Eratus's eyes snapped open as the sinewy lieutenant dove toward him, the fire of hate lacing his eyes. "Rill?! What the hell are-" his throat was slit before he could complete his reprimanding. Rill stood before the body, blood spouting from the cut and the dagger.

He wiped it swiftly on a clean patch of Eratus's cloak and put it back into its sheath around his ankle. "My captain, oh my captain, did you not see this coming? You were a fool old man, now I control all, but we mustn't have the troops realizing you were murdered now can we?" he said his eyes searching the room for the source of the candlelight. The cold stare finally fell upon the high wires containing the thick, yellowed candles. He grinned sadistically and sauntered casually up to it.

"Dear dear, such a draft in here," he mused putting a hand around the cold metal of the stand. He stifled a laugh and toppled it, the flames falling upon the body in the chair. The thick cloak ignited instantly, the hungry crimson flames licking higher to the slit throat. "Terrible accident really. Captain Eratus shouldn't have been sleeping with his candles burning should he?" Rill mused and stepped out of the tent. No one witnessed him coming out, it was deemed after the tent and their captain had burned to the ground, an accident.

James peered through the bars of the cell anxiously at the blaze just yards away. The whole camp had been thrown into an uproar and they were valiantly trying to put the flames out. "Looks pretty bad Jess, now's when we make our escape," James said grinning. Jessie nodded as he sat down, his chains rattling loudly as he did so. "Now, I'm not



real good at this, I don't know if I can break these," she said studying the manacles carefully. "Sure you can Jessie, I know you can!" James encouraged. She shook her head remorsefully and concentrated.

Her eyes began glowing a faint purple with the power of her mind, and James was forced to rub the goose bumps on his arms. Jessie looked powerful, and maybe even a bit evil when she worked on her psychic powers and it actually frightened him slightly. She clenched her teeth and her brow furrowed as the cold metal around her wrists refused to buckle. "Come on," James whispered under his breath. It was then he noticed the purple aura that began to emanate from around her body. He smiled as he realized that she was just about to achieve her goal. The purple that accompanied her eyes had gotten deeper as her powers had increased, and now it had spread to the faint glow that encircled her.

She exhaled forcefully as the locks embedded deep in the metal bands exploded with a small burst of metal parts. She looked at her now bare yet still red marked wrists and rubbed them gratefully. "I did it! Now let me see yours James, It'll be easier this time," she said taking James' hands. He blushed slightly, but turned the cuffs so Jessie could see the locks.

She smiled vaguely and concentrated again. James' locks clicked open less dramatically, but they still fell easily to the ground. Jessie released his hands and stood up. "Shall we be going then James?" she asked, "I do believe we have a village to save in the morning." James spread his wings and looked to the thatched roof above them. "Indeed we do. Hang on tight Jess," he said deviously and she took his signal to wrap her arms around his neck. He bent to lift her legs from the ground, and cradled her gently. She tightened her grip and adjusted her position to a more comfortable one as James rocketed through the old rotted roof and took off into the night sky.

Jessie kept her eyes shut until James exuberated cry rang out clearly in the air. "Open your eyes! This is the best feeling ever!" he shouted. The red head slowly opened one eye to see acres of forest rushing past beneath her. Now she knew what Meowth felt like when James had taken him on a little joyride'. Upon closer inspection, she opened both eyes to look up at her friend. He did not even sense her eyes upon him, the thrill of flight the only thing present in his mind.

She smiled and looked up at the double moons of Aradain. They were deeply engrossed in their celestial ballet of the night, and looked so peaceful in the silent serenity of the world. James slowed his speed, enjoying the slow return to Vertigo. He wondered how much emotion they would be showered with upon their return and grinned at the thought. Meowth was probably an emotional wreck. "Heh, Meowth probably is freaking about now," Jessie said suddenly. James gasped. "Can you-" "Read your mind? Yes I can, but don't worry, I'll give you your privacy," Jessie cut him off with a sly grin. He breathed and immense sigh of relief, hoping that she hadn't found out about his affection for her.

They flew the rest of the way in silence, until the spires of the castle were just visible. James quickened briefly until the courtyard was just below him. He back-flapped his wings stopping himself and gently lowered himself down. He lighted gently and slowly let Jessie

slip from his grip. "Feels good to be home," she said quietly. "Yeah, but we've gotta find Ash and everybody else! And fast!" James reminded her tugging at her elbow. "You're right, let's go see if he's in his room," she answered and they dashed quickly into the palace.

They found their way to Ash's room and rapped on the door loudly. "Ash? Ash are you there?" Jessie called. No answer came to her pleas, and she decided to take matters into her own claws, turning the knob and flinging the door open. "Ash?" she called and rolled her eyes at the sight that welcomed her.

Ash lay sprawled comically across his bed, sheets and blankets piled at the end of it. He was snoring lightly with his mouth wide open, and Pikachu lay curled on his stomach, ears and feet twitching in some kind of dream. "Well, I'd say he looks funnier than I do when I sleep," James mused. "Yeah well lets hope he's easier to wake up," Jessie spat and bent over Ash's sleeping form.

She gripped his arm and shook him violently. The only reaction this got was a hard slap in the face as he pointed his finger out towards the door. "GoPikachu," he mumbled, "thundershock now." Jessie snarled and quickly decked him back and he sat bolt upright in bed. "Huh? Who? What? What happened!?" he cried. "Ah! Ash get off of me! You're squishing my tail! My tail!" Pikachu's shrill cry rang out above all confusion.

Ash cried out in surprise and fell from the bed crashing to the floor along with his Pokemon. James leaned over him and smiled warmly. "Need a hand?" he asked and helped the dumbfounded Ash to his feet. He blinked rapidly in confusion and rubbed his sleep-blurred eyes to clear his vision. "IIs it really you? Jessie? James?" he asked quietly. "Jessie! James!" Pikachu answered his question by leaping into Jessie's arms. "I can't believe it! We thought you two were like, dead in a ditch on the side of a road somewhere!" he cried leaping from Jessie to a startled James.

Ash, overjoyed to see his friends, embraced both of them as best he could. "You're back! What happened? Are you okay? Do you need anything? Where were you guys?" Jessie and James could barely decipher any speech in the din. "Whoa! Whoa! Hold the phone!" Jessie cried shoving everyone away from her. James looked at her in confusion until he realized exactly why they had needed to find Ash so quickly. "What's up?" Ash asked. James looked to Jessie and they both smiled smugly. James spread his wings to their full length, forgetting that both he and Jessie were still in their nightclothes and regarded his friend jokingly as he opened his mouth to speak. "Well Ash, ready to play hero?"

### 3. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 3: To Protect the World From Devastation

#### Chapter 3: To Protect the World From Devastation

The cool, still air of the night gave no indication that anything was wrong. The sentinel spotted a thin trail of black smoke, coiling its way lazily into the sky, but that was all, the darkness concealed

everything. The mortal human was not used to it, and did not even suspect that the darkness could hide his worst fear of all.

Rill stood at the head of the group of soldiers, roughly clad and prepared for battle. The small army had subjected to his leadership after their captain had an unfortunate accident'. They had always assumed he was next in line to lead them, and would blindly follow anyone, so long as they got paid on time. "Uh, sir? We gonna be waitin' till dawn to start the fightin'?" a gruff voice asked. Rill gracefully lowered his arm to silence the man and smiled. "No, we attack on my word, just be ready," he said and drew the best crossbow he could find at the camp from under his green cloak.

He knocked an arrow into it, and raised it to his shoulder. "Sneak assaults are the best kind," he mused squeezing the trigger. The arrow whizzed through the still strata and found its mark expertly, landing with a sickening thud in the chest of the resistance guard. He never even had time to scream before clutching at the wooden shaft and toppling from the tower to the ground. "Now we move, when the first light warms the land, we strike."

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Jessie lead the way through the forest, all companions dressed and present, armed and ready to defend the small town. James flew high above the canopy, searching for any sign of which way the alliance had moved. No one had any clue where the town actually was, but they would try their hardest to save it.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the world, unaware of the actions that were to take place, Rhianna pressed closer into her husband's side, anxious for the warmth and security he brought to her. Aaron wrapped his arm around her, still staring blankly at the ceiling. The alliance had been spotted in the forest, and he was concerned that Vinetra had sent the smaller band of ruffians specifically for his village. He hadn't set up a defense line to stand sentinel that night, and he couldn't help but worry.

Jasper, also, lay awake that night with worry. He stared out his window wistfully, wondering whatever would become of his village now that the elder was gone. He sighed and closed his eyes for what seemed like the fortieth time to try and sleep that night, but found them instantly open again.

A red flurry slammed suddenly against the windowpane and Jasper jumped out of bed, restraining his voice as not to scream. "Kid! Lemme in!" he exhaled in relief as he realized it was Thierry. He moved stiffly to the window and opened it, letting the terrified bird into the room. "Geez you scared me! What's up?" he asked picking him up. "Yous guys has gotta get outta here! There's a whole big army an they took out the guard an they're headed this way! They're all armed an everything!" the bird squawked. Jasper shook his head in disbelief. "My dad wouldn't let that happen!" he breathed. "Look kid, who can fly, an who was outside jus now!" Thierry yelled. The boy, suddenly realizing the truth of his friend's words, picked up his clothes from the floor and changed quickly. Grabbing the bird from the windowsill in one fluid motion, he fled the safety of his room.

He ran as fast as his legs would carry him to his parents bedroom,

throwing the door open as loudly as he could. "Mom! Dad!" he cried leaping onto the bed with them. They both jumped and sat bolt upright as he did so, searching for what had disturbed their sleep. Rhianna, recognizing what it had been, took her son into her arms, breathing a sigh of relief. "Jasper dear, what's wrong?" she asked quietly. "Vinetra's army! They're coming after us!" he replied. This sentence got Aaron's attention. "What? How do you know?" he was answered by the warning bells tolling in distance. Rhianna cast a nervous glance to her husband, which he returned. "We'll talk about it later," he said and they both leapt out of bed to ready their plans for defense.

Jasper merely sat where he had been, cradling the lump of ruffled crimson feathers in his hands. "What's gonna happen now?" he asked never taking his eyes from his parents. "I dunno kid."

James sailed effortlessly above the forest as he searched frantically for any sign of army movement or a town. He looked down and spotted his friends, still making their way as best they could to follow his path. He scowled at his own inability and looked to the horizon, where the golden rays of dawn were just beginning to filter over the peaks of the mountains, and as James strained his eyes further, the silhouettes of the tallest buildings of a town. He smiled and stopped his flight midair, allowing the gentle breezes to assist him in gliding to the ground, and he lighted with ease in front of his group of friends. "Well?" Jessie asked. "I found it, follow me," he said triumphantly and rocketed back into the steadily paling strata.

It was one of those mornings where everything seemed suspended in time. The light mist locking in every sound, every ray of light, every movement. Everything, even the most colorful spring flowers budding in the grass seemed a dull gray color and everything was created out of the same shades of it. Rill's army was no object to the curious placidity of that morning. Perhaps it was because the world knew of the impending doom of an innocent people, or perhaps it was creating the atmosphere for a slaughter, but all Rill knew, was that this was a quite unusual morning for Aradain.

He stood up slowly from the tree stump he had been resting on, wiped the dew that had collected on the glossy metal of his armor and cleared his throat. "Light, has come, and so has the time for battle!" he cried raising an arm victoriously. The newly disciplined army, more out of fear than respect, groggily rose to their feet and brandished their weapons eagerly. They'd been waiting for what seemed like forever, and even ravaging a defenseless town would be better than sitting in wet grass for hours.

Rill mounted his sketchy black and white horse and adjusted the saddle appropriately. The other soldiers lucky enough to have steeds of their own mounted as well, and Rill lead the group slowly down the winding path to the village. He took his time, fully confident that he was infallible, and this mission would not be failed. It was a shame that the two messengers had escaped, but they were no match for an army. The psychic girl had only barely been able to break the locks, and what good were wings? Other than fleeing he saw no practical use for them. He smiled to himself, and hardly noticed when the sun broke over the mountains fully, bathing the landscape in pale gold light.

Rill enjoyed the thought of battle so, that he was able to occupy

himself with it the last mile to the gates of the city. They came slowly into view, no guards posted as to prepare the defense, and Aaron had neglected to tell anyone to stay there. He wasn't very organized, and all his energy now was devoted to rousing his own troops and at least attempting to ward off the enemy.

Rill yawned exaggeratedly, and pointed a thin wiry hand to the gate. "Break this annoyance down," he mused thumbing the stubble on his chin and promising himself that the first thing he'd do when he was done was shave. The troops did as they were instructed, parting the masses to allow several of the stronger men to charge at the heavy wooden gates with a roughly crafted ram. They slammed into it once, the knoll of the loud pound it made echoing against the tallest mountain in Aradain's face. No one really had a name for it, it was always just known as "The Devil". "Ah! The Devil has a voice today!" Rill called cheerfully, "let it ring with screams as well." The ram sounded again, this time, accompanied by the faintest crack of splitting wood.

One last slam with the dismembered tree trunk, and the ancient doors succumbed to the greater force, greater even than the time and weather they had withstood, and fell. There was a general cheer of glee amongst the soldiers as they poured through the opening like a crazed swarm of insects. Rill let them flow around him as he kept his horse steady, watching as several of the unfortunates who had been nearest to the gate met their gruesome fates. "Leave nothing! Take no prisoners!" he called above the steadily rising din.

A nearby cottage caught fire quickly as a well-aimed arrow lit ablaze landed neatly in the thatched roof. Shrieks were heard from inside and Rill smiled as he finally charged into the assault, drawing his sword as he did so. "Resistance is futile!" he cried sharply as he plunged his thick blade into the chest of the nearest man.

Aaron stared out the window of the church tower of the town in utter terror. He winced as several of his very own men fell just in front of the sanctuary, wailing in pain. He covered his mouth and looked away sharply, lifting his eyes to the statue of the seven messengers mournfully. "Why do you desert us in this time of need?" he asked spitefully, "the legends are all wrong! You weren't real at all, ever! My father lied to me!" A single tear ran down his cheek as he remembered the day his father, Jasper's Grandfather, and the village elder had been brutally murdered. "Why would he lie?" he whispered, fingering the intricately carved flames on the leader's head, "why?"

He jumped suddenly as the door whipped open and slammed hard on the wall next to it. Aaron gasped in surprise as he looked up to his Rhianna standing in the doorway. "Aaron! They're too much! No one can survive! We don't have a chance! We have to go!" she cried breathlessly. Aaron closed his eyes remorsefully and turned back to the window. He looked out and saw his wife was correct. Everything was being destroyed effortlessly, and he couldn't even see any of his men fighting anymore, he knew then he had lost. "What about Jasper?" he asked finally becoming assertive about escape. "I'm here Dad!" he didn't even have to see him before he nodded the affirmative to Rhianna and all three of them started down the stairs.

Jasper, for one, was thoroughly confused, simply running blindly as his parents instructed him, and he nearly ran into the door before

Aaron and Rhianna stopped dead in their tracks. "Someone search that run down temple!" Both Aaron's and Rhianna's stomachs twisted at the muffled cry from outside. "Jasper, when we tell you to, I want you to run out of town as fast as you can. Hide in the woods somewhere and we'll come find you later," Aaron said. "But Dad, I wanna stay with-" "I mean it son, don't question it," Aaron cut him off as the doorknob slowly began to swivel.

Jasper tensed as he felt his father's hand on his back, and his other grip the silver knob. "When I open the door, run," he said quietly, and drew the long blade that hung at his side. Jasper nodded and straddled his feet in preparation. Aaron drew in a shaky breath and flung the door open with a loud cry. The startled alliance soldiers jumped back in alarm and Aaron shoved the dazed boy out of the doorframe. "Run!" was his only word before Jasper sprang to life, sprinting with a purpose towards the edge of town.

He didn't bother to look back, all he heard were Aaron's and Rhianna's screams of agony, before they were silenced forever. He didn't stop, though he knew his parents had been killed, he ran in terror. Everything that he held dear was gone in just one morning, and now in fear of losing his own life, he fled. "Hey! There goes a kid! Someone get him!" He forced his legs to move faster at this. "I'll take care of him," that was the last thing he heard before he felt a sharp, excruciating pain in his left shoulder. He cried out and fell, landing tangled in a large bush at the base of a tree, and the last thing he saw before his vision clouded and finally went black, was a small pool of his own blood flowing from beneath him.

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Jessie scowled as she shielded her eyes from the steadily increasing light and looked up to where James was slowly sinking lower below the trees. She sighed dejectedly and kicked a rock to the side of the road. "Damn it! The whole town's probably dead by now!" she spat. "Well, if that's true, then we can help any survivors," Brock added optimistically. Jessie rolled her eyes and looked down the road they were travelling to see James emerge sullenly from the shadows. "James? What happened?" she called. He stayed silent until he reached his friends and they all stopped to listen to what he had to say. He looked disappointed, his wings drooping so low they brushed in the dirt, and his eyes directed towards the ground. There was an unnerving silence as he approached, the only sound made by his boots crunching slightly in the dead leaves strewn about the path, and all could not take their eyes off him in apprehension. "What is it?" Misty dared to ask, her gaze softening. "We're too late," was all he mumbled and motioned for the group to follow.

He led them just mere feet out of the forest and everyone gasped in terror. The ruins of a once beautiful city lay before them, bodies strewn haphazardly about in puddles of their own blood, mingling with nearby neighbors, friends, and relatives. Ash was forced to look away as he attempted to create a plan. "Just," he winced before he could finish, "look for any survivors, keep your swords ready, just in case, and meet back here in about half an hour, we'll go from there." The group nodded in tacit agreement and the last Ash heard of them was the hiss of metal against leather sheaths as six swords were drawn.

The friends went separate ways, each too horrified to want to share their reactions of this slaughter with anyone else. Jessie and James in particular felt the utter remorse and loss of the town. They had been responsible to rouse help in the form of their friends, and they had not made it back to Vertigo in time. The events played back in James' mind as he gently picked his way around bodies. He scowled, noting that not one person left was alive, and prayed that at least some had escaped Vinetra's wrath.

James stopped suddenly in his tracks at a rustling in the nearby bushes. Frightened that alliance soldiers had remained to pick off any loners, he pointed his sword defensively at the bush that seemed the center of movement. It seemed to respond, rustling vaguely until it stopped suddenly, something glinting in the sunlight just at the base of it. James lowered his blade, curious, and stepped cautiously toward the object, shielding his vision from the bright glare emanating from it. He bent down cautiously a few feet away from it and squinted to get a better view.

What he saw perked his curiosity even more, yet terrified him at the same time. Sprawled out from the base of the bush was a hand, and in it, a bloody arrow was tightly clenched. He put one hand to his mouth and gently parted the foliage with one hand, looking beneath it. A pair of eyes as green as his own peered back at him, and he simply stared back in amazement and shock. The little boy smiled warmly at him and finally relaxed after what had seemed like hours of pain. "Finally, the angels have come for me, now I can be with my mom and dad," he whispered.

James finally snapped out of his trance, shaking his head to clear his dulling senses and parted the bushes swiftly. "Hang on kid," he promised and gently lifted the boy from the ground, revealing a large red stain in the soil beneath him. He stirred, and looked up at James with the same loving smile on his face. "Hi, do angels have names?" he asked weakly. James raised an eyebrow, and suddenly remembered his newest addition to his body, spreading them slightly. "Shh, I'll explain everything later, just rest and don't strain yourself," James replied and carried the child to the entrance of the town where Ash still stood, fingers only now beginning to grip the sword.

James rolled his eyes as he stepped over to him. "Wimp," he said smirking. Ash took the comment to heart, glaring at the young man vindictively, until he saw the boy who rested in his arms. "Damn it James! Don't joke like that when there's a child's life on the line! We've gotta get him back to Vertigo!" he shouted angrily. James sensed the nervousness and apprehension in his voice and was sympathetic to it, remembering exactly what it felt like to be truly afraid. "I'll fly him back, you guys leave when you can," he assured him with a gentle and kind smile.

Ash sighed heavily and pointed back down the road. "Just go, we'll catch up," he said rubbing his temples ruefully. James nodded in tacit agreement and gently spread his wings to ease himself into the sky, not launch as he normally did. After all, he was carrying precious cargo. The boy squirmed in pain and James felt a small, hot trickle of blood run down his arms as he slowly glided back to Vertigo. James bit his lip remembering what the child had said about being with his parents, and realized that he must be alone now. "Hey kid, you awake?" he asked gently.

The emerald eyes opened again, only slightly, and they gazed up at James with blind admiration. "Hi," he whispered. James smiled back at him dipping lower in the sky where the wind was not as fierce to hear him better. "Don't worry, you'll be alright, I'll clean your shoulder up and you can rest just as soon as we land," he promised. The boy looked to the ground, and winced at the persistent pain in his shoulder. "So I'm not dead," he mused, "but who are you?" James picked up speed as the spires of Vertigo palace slowly began to appear over the tops of the trees. "My name's James, what about you?" he asked tenderly. "My name?" the boy asked. James nodded. "Jasper."

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Later that evening, Ash and the rest of the group, minus James, returned to Vertigo downtrodden and empty handed. They had found no other survivors, not even a Pokemon had been spared. They had even gone so far as to bury a few of the more mutilated bodies, including two in particular found in the stairwell of the church in the center of the town. The rest they had left and returned to see if James was successful in saving the little boy.

Upon arriving at the palace, Cerise received them solemnly, leading them into the dining hall to speak. They took their usual seats, Jessie wincing at James' empty spot next to her, as Cerise seated herself at the head, sighing and rubbing her temples. Misty put a hand to her back and motioned for a servant to bring some water. Cerise smiled, but indicated that she was fine, seated Misty, and began what she had planned to say.

"What happened today, was nothing short of a tragedy. Innocent people were killed, and uselessly. They died for no other purpose than Vinetra's fear of losing her influence on the good People of Aradain, and for this we have paid. You'll be happy to know, James made it back here unharmed, and the boy is alright, his name is Jasper, as James told us, and he's in the guestroom nearest James' chamber. Now, we can rejoice at this small victory later, more important events have begun to take place. You all have been trained on your weapons since you arrived here, and as well as your powers, and the army that had been sighted is too much of a risk to leave alone, they must be stopped, before any other towns as defenseless as that one was are destroyed."

There was a disconcerting cessation of sound as Cerise's words slowly made their impact on the small group. Nervous glances were exchanged, hands were held, as the need for more information grew stronger. "When do we start?" Pikachu asked, his throat tight with anxiety. "As soon as possible, I will alarm the Vertigan army in the morning, and I'll send messengers out to friendly towns to rally some more help, we'll need all of it we can get," Cerise replied.

Jessie stuck a fingernail in her mouth and bit it apprehensively as Meowth gently eased his way into her lap. "We should tell James," he whispered. Jessie nodded silently, and scratched the cat absent-mindedly behind the ears. "Cerise, we should all get some rest, I'll tell James," she said. Cerise smiled. "And be sure to tell him to sleep too, we'll need his wings tomorrow," she said. Jessie chuckled as she excused herself from the table and left the room, Meowth close at her heels.



The wound their way up the staircase that led up the tower James' room was situated at the top of, stopping halfway at the door they recognized as the guestroom. "Shhh," Jessie whispered, putting a finger to her lips and making eye contact with Meowth, as she slowly turned the knob. She slid her thin frame into the smallest crack the door would allow it to pass through, and Meowth slipped in afterward. James sat sentinel on a low wooden stool at the bedside and Jessie smiled warmly, mirroring the grin on his face as he gazed at the little boy, who now slept peacefully. He didn't notice her as she walked in, and Jessie frowned at the white bandages stained lightly with red binding Jasper's wounded shoulder. "So, you saved your first life today?" she whispered reverently. James looked up from Jasper startled, but upon seeing his friend, beckoned her to join him.

Jessie took a seat next to her James and patted him lightly on the shoulder. "He called me an angel," he whispered. "Really?" Jessie replied resting her chin on his shoulder. "Yeah, and that's what I'm going to be for him, his guardian angel," he said, running a hand lightly through Jasper's ebony hair. "What do you mean?" Jessie asked frowning. "He lost his parents, he needs someone, and I feel it should be me," James whispered and tucked the blankets more tightly around Jasper's chin.

Jessie smiled at the first show of paternal instincts from James and stood up quietly. "I need to talk to you, privately, but that can wait until morning, just promise me you'll sleep," she said. James nodded. "Sure," was all he muttered. "No really, promise me," Jessie said forcefully. James turned around, and smirked crookedly. "No really, I promise," he said mockingly. Jessie flicked his shoulder lightly with a claw and grinned. "I know you want to stay here, but I'm going back to my room, see you in the morning, you've got one hell of a busy day tomorrow," she said, and both she and the cat left the room soundlessly.

James raised an eyebrow and sighed as he watched Jessie leave. "Sleep well Jess," he whispered wistfully to himself and stood. A larger, overstuffed chair intended to provide as much comfort for guests as was needed stood in the corner of the room and he took it. It cause him a small struggle with his wings, but he eventually got them adjusted comfortably. He sighed contentedly and closed his eyes, falling asleep quickly.

Ash awoke early that morning, for a reason unknown to him, and looked to the window. The gray early light just barely illuminated his room, and he scowled as he roused himself to dress. He then opened his window completely, scattering a few bird-like Pokemon whom had decided it would make a suitable perch to sleep, and breathed in deeply, the flames on his limbs and tail flaring slightly with the sudden rush of oxygen. The castle courtyard looked serene in the mist of early morning, everything seemingly gray in color, save for the grass, which still retained a hint of the lush green it would be at noon.

Ash frowned at it, though it seemed peaceful, something was amiss, and he could sense it. He searched fruitlessly for anything out of place, and shrugged, beginning to turn away, until a flash of red in the corner of his vision caught his attention and Jessie appeared from a corner of the courtyard still hidden in the shadows left over from the night. "\_Hey Ash, could you come down here? I want to talk

to you\_," he jumped as he heard the voice not in his ears as he was accustomed to, but inside his mind. He put a hand to his forehead as he broke into a cold sweat, but nodded dumbly to her and proceeded down to the main courtyard.

Jessie smiled at him as he approached, and put her arm around his shoulders, leading him to the front gate. The sun had just begun its steady ascent into Aradain's sky, combing the landscape with narrow fingers of golden light, and both friends sighed at its beauty. "Kinda hard to believe this beautiful place is so divided by conflict, isn't it?" Jessie breathed. Ash simply nodded in response. "I've done a lot of thinking since we've been here," she added quietly. "Oh really?" Ash replied nonchalantly. Jessie bit her lip and sighed shakily. "And I need to ask you something, and I want an honest answer, and don't bother lying, I can sense it," she said forcefully. Ash's features twisted in confusion as he placed his hands neatly on his hips. "I thought you and James were so incredibly close, why don't you ask him?" he said nervously, afraid of what Jessie could ask of him.

Jessie closed her eyes, and turned her back to the sun, leaning against the gate gently. "Because it's about him," she whispered. Ash swallowed hard. "What about him? You guys having problems?" he asked quickly. Jessie raised her claws defensively and shook her head. "Oh no! No, we're closer than ever, it's just that, I'm scared to death that we'll get...Too close, if you know what I mean," she said. Ash felt his heart sink at Jessie's words, and could practically already see James' heart break and crumble in front of his eyes. "Yes, I know what you mean, now, what did you want to ask?" he said as calmly as was possible at that moment. "I want you to promise me something. Promise me you won't let James fall in love with me. I wouldn't be able to stand it, please don't ask me to explain, just promise me," she said taking Ash's hands.

He cleared his throat to stall Jessie slightly and gather his composure, then, rubbing the backs of the young woman's claws with his thumbs affectionately, he met her eyes with an honest gaze. "I promise you," he whispered. Jessie grinned and embraced the boy with a small gasp of relief. "Thank you Ash, thank you from the bottom of my heart," she whispered. "Uh...You're welcome," Ash replied, hiding his remorse guilefully. Jessie released Ash and looked back to the rising sun smiling vaguely. "Well, I'd better rouse James, he's got a busy day," she said. Ash frowned slightly as he saw her lips move, but could not decipher what she had said, but Jessie brushed past him before he could inquire, and was gone.

He remained standing at the gate in perplexity, running through the movements of her lips again in his mind, and frowned more deeply as he attained a vague image of the short phrase, which to him, looked like, "If I could turn back time."

Jessie reached James' tower shortly, and debated whether or not he had returned to his chamber to sleep, or had stayed with Jasper, then recalling the previous nights events, she turned and gingerly opened the door to the guestroom. As she had fully expected, James lay asleep in the large chair in the corner, Jasper still in the bed. Deciding to let the boy sleep longer, Jessie bent down and gently shook James. "Wake up James," she whispered as he began to stir. He opened one eye a small emerald slit, and promptly closed it again, mumbling something as he turned over into the pillows lining the

chair. "Come on pal, get up, we need your help," Jessie chided. "Mmm, what for?" James muttered sleepily. "We need your wings," Jessie replied lifting James' slim form from the chair by his shoulders.

James opened both eyes fully at this, the emeralds laced with fear. "What's so serious that I have to fly for?" he asked. Jessie sat next to him, the foreboding feeling she had ever since they had been captured by the alliance returning swiftly, and she began to tremble. "Yeah, Cerise has declared that the army that captured us is to be gotten rid of, and you know what that means," she said leaning closer to the warmth and security her friend brought her. "Jessie you're shaking," James said pulling her close into him. She didn't object, and even wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm scared, and I have no clue why. Something just feels wrong, screw Cerise, you're not going anywhere!" she said, her voice quavering.

James ran a hand through her hair reassuringly and held her close. "Why?" he asked. "Something bad's going to happen, that's definite, when, I don't know exactly, but very soon, and what, I don't have a clue," she replied, trembling more at verbally confessing her feelings. "Well, you do have the psychic powers, and if you think something's up, I'm staying here, I should take care of Jasper anyway," James replied. "We'd better tell Cerise," Jessie said, wrinkling her nose. James nodded and helped her up, and glanced over his shoulder one last time at Jasper as they headed down to the dining hall where Cerise most likely was at the moment.

They were correct in their assumption, finding her sitting sullenly hunched over a small stack of scrolls. Jessie cleared her throat to get her attention, and both she and James didn't dare move past the other end of the table. Cerise looked up, and smiled vaguely at them. "Why are you standing over there? Come James, you've got plenty of scrolls to deliver today," she said groggily. James started to nod, but crossed his arms over his chest stubbornly as Jessie gripped his arm tightly. "No, not today," he said forcefully.

Cerise raised one eyebrow in shock and stood up. "What do you mean no? I'm a princess! You don't refuse a princess!" she screeched indignantly. "Well! Excuuuse me princess if I'm worried about my best friend's life! I'll have you know, I've been having premonitions in the form of feelings, something big is going down, and James is not leaving!" she said her azure eyes flashing purple. Cerise rubbed the prickling hairs on the back of her neck and scowled. "I don't care what you feel, it's what's best for the resistance, nothing is wrong, James will be fine, now get over here so I can tell you where to deliver these messages!" she yelled. "No!" Jessie and James shot simultaneously. "Yes!" Cerise shot back slamming her palms down on the smooth wooden table.

Jessie and James leaned forward onto the table, nearly literally snarling, their teeth clenched and bared. "Cerise, no one is going anywhere today! Unless you want to get them all killed!" Jessie yelled. "Yeah? Well who are you to give orders you stuck up selfish little brat!" Cerise replied. "Me? A stuck up little brat? Looked in the mirror lately your bitchness?" Jessie yelled back. "Bitch? Well I'm not the one sacrificing the resistance for her pathetic little boyfriend!" "Boyfriend?" Jessie and James replied, enraged. The argument continued heatedly, until all three were red in the face, but they stopped as they heard a frantic beating on the dining hall

door.

Jessie turned swiftly and proceeded to open it. "Don't bother straining yourself your royal wimp, I will traverse the deadly smooth tile, to open the infamous nail breaking door," she hissed. "Why you ungrateful little-" she stared, but an icy emerald glare from James kept her in her chair.

Jessie opened the door and raised an eyebrow at the absence of anyone standing behind it, until she felt two sharp tugs at her tail. She looked down and smiled at Riley who stood at her feet. She scooped the little dragon from the floor, patting him on the crests adorning the top of his head lovingly. "Hey little guy, what's up?" she asked. Riley gripped his chest, attempting to catch his breath and Jessie took him back to the table. "I...I...I'm glad...I found you two!" he sputtered. James joined his friend as Riley finally found the air to speak. "It's big you guys, I've never seen anything like it!" he chirped excitedly. "What? What? Tell us!" James said bringing his head to eye level with the dragons. He lowered his slitted eyes seductively, and flicked his long forked tongue out tickling the end of James' nose furtively. "Two of the scrolls have opened," he said. Cerise jumped from her seat at those few poignant words and instantly joined in the conversation.

Riley enjoyed being the center of attention, increasing the drama of his demeanor drastically. "And it's got a bit of a twist to it," he added, then stopped. There was a silence while Riley surveyed his captivated audience through half-open and presumptuous eyes. "Tell us you little winged twig lizard!" Jessie finally yelled startling Riley from his noble stature. "The first one, was the symbol of the mind, and the second was the symbol of the wind."

#### 4. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 4: Mind, Heart, Body, and Soul Asunder

#### Chapter 4: Mind, Heart, Body, and Soul Asunder

James held the ancient yellow paper to his chest apprehensively, staring blankly at Jessie who had Riley read hers aloud. Her brow furrowed more deeply as the dragon got further into it, and James flinched as he realized he had been biting his lip in anticipation.

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"Powers of the mind must be mastered ere thou shalt exploit them correctly, and therefore, the bearer of this gift shall undergo a test, as the stories of old that have been handed down the generations have foretold. Hear now, the Myth of Shadowrun. Nestled within the demons of the world, rivulet of shadows lies. A place of mystery, death, and sorrow. Many have tried in attempts to discover the secrets of this mystical place, but all have failed, and no souls have returned uncorrupted. The myth will be unlocked, how, when, and why, the prophets failed to perceive, but fare well young one, all will be revealed in due time."

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Riley's brow furrowed as he looked up from the scroll. "I don't get it," he muttered. "I don't either, what about James' scroll?" Jessie said pointing. James nodded dumbly and stood next to Jessie taking her hand gingerly. "Still got that feeling Jess?" he asked through his teeth. "Yeah, more than ever, now that I've heard that scroll," she replied. "Now I feel it," James said nervously as Riley began to read.

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"Mind, Body, Heart and soul asunder,  
all will come to death in thunder.  
By light of noon, or dead of night,  
fate decides, to love or smite.  
Remorse and guilt, the poisons that kill  
to let them claim you, is to surrender your will.  
Though sorrow reigns, with its despairing kin  
the answer my friend, lies in the wind.  
The myth, it beckons you, and calls out your name,  
you must answer the call, or all is in vain.  
Reach out to yourself like never you did  
you alone can rescue a soul from the shadows which it  
slid."

—

Riley looked up from the scroll, handing it back to James. "Just the stupid poem?" he asked. "Yep, and they don't seem to have much in common either," Riley replied. "Well, I think we'd be better off just staying in the palace," Cerise announced putting the scroll back into its respective place on the altar. Jessie and James smiled victoriously and patted each other on the backs as they exited the tiny ceremonial room deep in the bowels of the palace.

James decided to check on Jasper, and everyone else went to the library to have a quiet day of rest before engaging in battle with the alliance. They would be a more than formidable opponent, even the ragged, disorganized band that had managed to capture Jessie and James. Vinetra was powerful, and the resistance operated on two main beliefs: that the seven messengers would awaken the powers of peace, and that the evil queen had more power than she perceived, and would not realize it until it was too late, for they were yet to see her display her powers in a devastating force.

Jasper sat up in bed excitedly as James entered his room, reaching his free arm out to his winged role model. "James! I saw you this morning, you stayed with me!" he cried happily. "Absolutely kiddo," he replied ruffling the shoulder length black hair affectionately.

"And who was that you were hugging?" he asked lowering his eyes deviously. James sighed. "That, was my best friend in the world, Jessie, you'll meet my other friends today too," James promised. "I think you love her," Jasper said sitting up in bed, and grinned as James flushed bright crimson. "What ever gave you that idea?" he asked. Jasper smiled crookedly, crossing his good arm over his chest. "Okay fine, I'll tell you a secret if you promise never to tell anyone," James said lowering his voice. Jasper nodded vigorously and leaned closer to James to hear his quiet secret. "I'm in love with Jessie, and she knows nothing about it. Now, don't even hint at this around her, or I'll be forced to torture you in ways so horrible I can't even mention them!" James wailed theatrically.

Jasper began to enjoy the concept of love between the two people he had seen that morning, one being his savior and new friend, laughing warmly and shoving James lightly. "Oh yeah? What could you do to me?" he asked. James cast him a shifty glance from the corners of his eyes, and dove toward Jasper, tickling his sides playfully. "I'll make you die laughing!" he said as Jasper buckled under his small torment, laughing hysterically. "Had enough punk?" James asked with a smirk. Jasper fingered his chin thoughtfully and nodded. "Yeah, can we go for a walk? I hate being cooped up inside!" the boy replied vivaciously. James smiled warmly and helped Jasper out of bed. "Sure, we'll go down to the courtyard," James said leading the small boy outside by his hand.

Jasper seemed delighted by the fountain, dashing over to it as soon as it was visible. "Oh! Who's the pretty lady?" he asked pointing, failing to notice Misty standing behind it. James did, and smiled slyly at her as she strolled casually over to him. "Well, introduce yourself," James said happily. Jasper looked up at James blankly in confusion so he crouched by the boy's side lovingly and turned him gingerly by the shoulders to face Misty. She bowed elegantly in front of him, delighting his childish fantasies. "Oh," he breathed reaching out to touch the sleek fins atop her head. She allowed it, smiling warmly. "Are all James' friends as pretty as you?" Jasper asked in veneration. Misty laughed heartily and put an arm around the boy's shoulders to whisper in his ear. "Nope, I'm the prettiest," she said with a smirk.

James frowned sarcastically and swatted her lightly for that remark. "Now now, mustn't be teaching him to be vain now can we?" he asked. "Well then he shouldn't be hanging out with a former member of Team Rocket," Misty replied winking furtively, but her smile soon faded, "well I'd best be off, Jessie told you we're attacking that alliance army right?" James nodded and waved as the mermaid strolled nonchalantly back into the palace. Jasper looked up at James, a baffled look distorting his young features. "Team Rocket?" he asked. James chuckled as they continued on their way. "It's a long story," he mused.

Jasper seemed satisfied with this, and asked questions about other things in the palace and James and his other friends, until the young man became concerned about the boy's uncannily jovial attitude. He decided to put his mind at ease and took Jasper aside beside a small brook that ran through the gardens at the back of the palace. "Jasper, sit down pal, I need to talk to you," he said seriously. Jasper sat immediately, rolling backward through a patch of Cerise's favorite flowers and laughing joyously, which caused James' frown to deepen. Finally realizing the severity of what his friend had to say,

Jasper sidled close to him affectionately.

James sighed, and ran his hand through Jasper's hair. "You know that your parents, didn't make it out of your village right?" he asked slowly. Jasper nodded practically. "Yeah, I watched them get killed," he said remorsefully. "Don't you miss them?" James asked, concerned. "No, not really, they didn't really love me, and I don't even think I was their kid. Besides, you can take care of me now! Right?" Jasper said embracing James with his uninjured arm. James hugged the boy back lovingly. "I'll take care of you Jasper, I promise you that."

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"What?!" Rill shrieked at the cowering minion bowing and begging for mercy before him. Night had long since fallen on that day, and all slept peacefully in Vertigo palace, but the Alliance army headed by Rill had heard of their plans to attack them, and was preparing for the assault. "I tell you, it was Nightwing who let the two messengers to escape!" the soldier wailed, "please don't kill me! I'm merely the person who picked the short straw!" Rill rubbed his rough chin thoughtfully, and smirked. "I will not kill you," he said evenly, "but only if you bring me that treacherous murderous bastard here in less than five minutes!"

The soldier shrieked shrilly and dashed out of the tent with a small flurry of dust. Rill fumed quietly, mentally counting off the five minutes he had allotted to fetch the insolent assassin. The original man returned quickly, with several others, dragging a kicking screaming and protesting Nightwing into the tent. The young man cried out sharply in pain as he was struck firmly in the back with the blunt end of a spear and thrown roughly at Rill's feet. The general snorted condescendingly, and crossed his arms across his scrawny chest. "Well well well, we meet again," he chortled.

Nightwing looked up, and grinned with relish. "Man, so Eratus finally bit the dust, who could've known he'd be succeeded by someone who wouldn't know how to lead an army if I told him!" he said, amused. Rill snapped his fingers and a whip from an unseen location cracked down upon Nightwing's back, silencing him for the moment. "You have betrayed Vinetra and the Alliance by letting the messengers go, and for this unforgivable crime, you will die in the worst way possible," Rill hissed through clenched teeth. "What are you gonna do? Talk me to death?" Nightwing asked raising an eyebrow. "Or perhaps you'll force me to watch you undress, the gods know that'll kill a man, but that might be too quick a death, too painless, you'll want to try something different," Nightwing said coolly.

Rill howled in rage, pointing a long bony finger towards Nightwing accusingly. "Slit the traitors wrists! Then toss him into the woods to wander! When he is too weak from loss of blood to go any further, the wild Pokemon will devour him while he still lives," he snarled. Nightwing smiled as the same guards who had dragged him in, roughly hauled him out. "I'll be glad to be rid of you, you wormy skeleton son of a bitch!" he called and Rill clenched his teeth at the final insult from his arch enemy. "Well at least he's gone, now I can get back to my planning."

Later that night, Nightwing, who had been dragged far away from the camp, looked balefully at the other man who held a blade to his

wrist, his hand shaking, unable to cut it. He had once considered that man a friend to him, but if he valued his life he would not betray Rill. "I can't do it, you're my friend," he moaned. Nightwing smiled. "Well Marcus, at least you'll still have your tattoo," he said cheerfully pointing to the dragon coiled around the soldier's neck. "You too," he replied pointing to Nightwing's namesake, two black and jagged, roughly wing-shaped tattoos on either side of his face. "Well, best get on with it," Nightwing encouraged, and gritted his teeth as he felt cold steel cut through the flesh underneath his wrist. "I did it the wrong way, it should give you some time to find help," Marcus whispered.

Nightwing smiled, despite his dizziness and the blood dripping slowly from the wound. "Thanks My friend, now get your ass back to camp before that bastard kills you," he said pointing. Marcus nodded, and mounted his shaggy horse, waving a final and fond farewell to his friend, and urged the horse skillfully over the thick underbrush.

Nightwing watched him go, and staggered backward until he found the support of a tree, sliding down it to rest on the cold forest floor. He gently turned his slashed wrist over and winced at the ugly purple wound leaking hot red blood onto his tawny pants and boots. He gritted his teeth as the torn flesh scraped against itself as he lowered the hand to his thigh, and freed his green cloak from behind him. He gently eased a dagger from its home on the inside of his boot and roughly slashed a long thin strip of thick ivy fabric.

He bound his wrist tightly and painfully, all the while feeling the color slowly leave his face through the wound. He sighed in mild relief as he completed the crude tourniquet, and moved his functional hand to the gold charm of the alliance the held the cloak to his body. It was an imprint of an elaborate leaf Vinetra had chosen and his lips curled in malice as he thought of her. "Never again, you betrayed me, as you have all of Aradain, what a fool I was to believe in you," he snarled and tore the flimsy metal clasps from his throat.

They broke easily, and he shuddered at the sudden rush of cold air along his back as the symbol of his crushed loyalty fell to the forest floor. He threw the tiny gold disk as far into the brush as it would go, clenching his teeth bitterly in rage and against the icy air. Deciding he would rather wear alliance green than freeze to death, he pulled the dense garment around his shoulders gratefully, shivering in want of warmth.

He clutched the ends of the cape together at the nape of his neck as he pushed himself weakly from the ground using only his legs. He rested against his tree, catching his breath, his icy gray eyes shut tightly in pain. "May the seven powers have mercy on my soul," he muttered as he staggered to a standing position, and forced himself to put on foot in front of the other, as he started his way into the forest.

The sentinel standing guard in one of the twin watch towers protecting Vertigo palace yawned broadly as the platinum sun slowly began to peek over the mountain ranges that mothered the Neonthian sea. He knocked an arrow into his bow in boredom and pointed it towards a nearby tree, letting go of the shaft nonchalantly. It struck with a sickening sound and wobbled into its place neatly



before the silence of morning again settled over Vertigo. He watched a few cerulean feathers swirl in a light breeze and snorted quietly. "That guy makes more of a mess than I do," he muttered yawning again.

He used the motion of his chest to fall forward onto the railing, dangling his arms out into space, and cringing at the feeling of blood gathering in his fingertips. "Well, this is what I get for taking the night shift," he groaned flipping over to arch his stiff back over the cool, smooth wood. It snapped in several places and he sighed in relief, scratching his stomach in the process.

The guard's peace was to be short lived, for a rustle of green caught the corner of his vision and he was instantly on his feet again, aiming the loaded crossbow with a shaking hand toward the disturbance. "Who goes there?" he asked in a faltering voice. The brush rustled weakly one last time as a young man, clad in the green cloak of the alliance fell forward from them onto his stomach, his pale face twisted in agony, and the clothes stained with blood. The guard lowered his weapon, turning to face the other tower. "Someone get him into the palace! We could use a captured alliance soldier!" he called. The other man nodded and descended the stairs to the ground to retrieve the injured man.

James jumped as his door was flung open, startling an already awake Jasper. "Ow my shoulder!" he cried. James gasped and put a hand to it tenderly. "Oh Jasper! I'm so sorry! You okay?" he cried. Jasper inhaled sharply in pain, but smiled in relief as the pain subsided. "Ugh, yeah I'm fine," he muttered. Jessie, who had stood in the doorway waiting for a response from James finally snapped her fingers sharply. He jumped and turned to look at her scowling. "What?" he asked, irked at his rude awakening. "Well James, if I may turn your attention away from your honorary son for a moment I have some wonderful news," Jessie said smugly. "James I'm still sleepy," Jasper whined, tugging gently on James' sleeve.

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James smiled warmly and laid the boy back down in the bed. "You sleep longer, I won't be far away, just downstairs, okay?" he said tenderly. Jasper yawned groggily and pulled the blanket tightly around his chin, and Jessie smiled warmly as James kissed him lightly on the forehead and stood up, moving to his closet for a change of clothes, tripping over the many soiled garments he had neglected to take down to the wash room.

He selected an outfit and grabbed his boots from the next to his closet and followed Jessie as she walked out into the hallway. "You really love him don't you?" Jessie asked putting an arm around James' shoulders. James chuckled. "He loves me like a father, so why

shouldn't he get it back?" he replied. "Wow, I wish I had someone to love me that much, it must feel good," Jessie mused. James bit his tongue, resisting the urge to tell Jessie that, yes, she did and always had someone to love her that much, and simply nodded.

Jessie led the way down to the wing of the palace where her room was located, and stopped at a door James did not recognize. "We caught ourselves a traitor," she whispered with relish as she turned the knob, and slowly pushed the door open.

James regarded his friend quizzically as he peered cautiously at the slight form that now rested in the bed, a wrist bandaged in already bloodstained strips of white cloth being tended to by Misty. "God, if we don't stop this bleeding we're going to lose him," she muttered tying the bandages tighter. James gasped in terror, half at her horribly obvious, at least to him, incorrectness, at attempting to save the young man's life. "Misty move I'm taking over, go find Ash and an arrowhead," he said moving to the young man's side and shoving her rudely out of the way. "James?" she stuttered, surprised to see him, "uh, okay, but why?" James began unwrapping the wrist and the stricken youth groaned in pain. "Just do it, and hurry. I know how to save his life, basic Team Rocket field first aide, we have to cauterize the wound or he'll bleed to death even through the bandages. He was lucky though, his wrist is slit the wrong way," he mused pressing a thumb hard against the torn flesh.

Misty looked to Jessie, who grinned at the knowledge that she also possessed, and shrugged, dashing out of the room to find Ash. Jessie knelt beside James pressing her thumb against the side of the wound that James' would not cover, and bit her tongue in concentration. "We learned this the hard way eh Jess?" James mused. "Yeah, and we managed to save you, perhaps we can save this loyal bastard too," Jessie replied. "Well, he will have valuable information, hopefully, if not Cerise will have him killed," James muttered disdainfully.

Jessie simply nodded in response, and they waited impatiently until their ears heard the sweet sound of the door being opened and Ash's footsteps. "Hey, what do you need me and this for?" he asked holding out the arrow the second he thought Jessie and James were listening. James beckoned him to his side with a bloody hand and Ash knelt by him somberly. "Listen Ash, I need you to heat the tip until it's white, then give the arrow to me," he said sternly.

Ash nodded dumbly and held only the sharp metal head of the arrow in his palm tightly. His hand glowed briefly with heat and he removed the arrow, revealing a wooden shaft with an otherworldly white tip. "Here, hold it down low," Ash instructed, and James took the wooden shaft gratefully. "JessieHold him still," he said with such authority, Jessie knew that the silence of the room would be shattered momentarily. She moved her hand away from the slit wrist and pinned the young man's shoulders to the bed.

James swallowed hard, remembering the feeling of bleeding to death, and pressed the smoldering arrow to the man's wrist. He screamed in agony, opening his steel gray eyes wide for the first time he had arrived in Vertigo. He lurched forward, attempting to rid his wrist of the searing pain, and his nose of the scent of his own singed flesh, and the pain finally did stop when James decided the wound was sealed enough. "Now, get me some bandages," he said sharply, looking

to Misty. She nodded dumbly and scurried out of the room.

Jessie grinned smugly and took her spot next to James back. "Well James, this'll be another life you've saved," she mused. "Yeah, perhaps one day I can save yours, and then we'll be even," he replied wiping the last trickles of crimson from the young man's wrist. He turned to him and frowned at the still twisted expression on his face. "Hey pal, can ya hear me?" he asked quietly. The only response was a low groan, as he weakly tried to pull his injured wrist into his side. James held it firmly in place, and stood, putting the back of his hand to the man's forehead, nodding approvingly. "Well he doesn't have a fever, I do believe he'll make it," he said happily.

Misty returned with fresh bandages, and James bound the wrist securely. "He'll have a nasty scar, but he'll live," he assured her and all present in the room heaved a sigh of relief. James looked furtively down to his hand, where the once angry red scars lacing it were finally fading to a pale white and closed it tightly, grateful to still have it. "I should know," he said to himself and looked fondly down at the man he had saved.

As if in response, he opened his eyes ever so slightly and glared up at his savior. "You fool," he muttered. This got the attention of the small group and they all turned to face him. "Got a name?" Ash asked impulsively. "Nightwing, what's it to you?" the man answered bitterly. Jessie and James gasped as they remembered their old friend from the forest and scowled at him disconcertingly. "Well, Nightwing, why were we so wrong in saving your life? Even after you were so quick to jeopardize ours? You should be grateful anyone takes pity on you," James said placing his hands angrily on his hips, the feathers at the crests of his wings bristling slightly. "Because the resistance doesn't have a chance, and I'm just going to die here like the rest of you idiots!" Nightwing answered sitting up slightly.

The color drained from his face at this, but he managed to erect an air of nobility about him. "What the hell are you talking about?" Ash asked joining in the interrogation. "They know where you are and they march now! This puny little resistance town doesn't stand a chance against Rill and Vinetra!" he said angrily. As if to prove Nightwing's point, a knoll sounded in the distance, and a great commotion rose in the courtyard as orders began to filter their way above the rest of the panicked voices.

Everyone jumped as the door was flung wide open and Cerise dashed in with a pink blur of her dress. "Guys! Get out to the courtyard now! Vertigo is being attacked by the alliance! We don't stand a chance without you!" she cried, her face flushed with anxiety and stress. Jessie gripped her stomach as it twisted suddenly at the mention of the battle and sunk to her knees with a small yelp of pain. "Oh, Jessie!" James gasped catching her before she collapsed to the floor. "Jessie!" Ash cried rushing along with Misty to her side, "you okay?" She put a hand to her forehead and rubbed her eyes, squeezing them shut in pain. "YYeah, I'm fine," she replied.

James' look of concern deepened as she gripped at her stomach again, this time, opening her eyes in a furious attempt to ward off the pain. "Get me up," she demanded curtly, and James gently draped her arm around his shoulders, standing himself and taking her with him. She stood in utter perplexity, the sheer terror she had felt so suddenly

still gnawing at the back of her mind. "Ash, Misty, you go on, we'll be there in a second," James said sitting Jessie down on the end of Nightwing's bed. The duo nodded, and Cerise led them out of the room as quickly as when she had entered.

He stroked her cheekbone affectionately as the color slowly but surely returned to her face. "You okay now?" he asked sincerely concerned. Jessie smiled at him and stood on her own accord. "Yeah, fine, now shall we kick some alliance ass?" she asked vigorously. James smiled back as he stood to join her. "Ready when you are Jess!" he replied, and they followed Cerise's flight, gathering their weapons on the way.

The entire group stood in waiting for them as they finally reached the courtyard, fully dressed and armed. "'Bout time you got here! Now let's go! Innocent people are losing their lives as we speak!" Pikachu piped from Ash's shoulder. "They're just over the ridge, the resistance army we managed to scrape together is ready for you, and good luck, and may the seven powers protect you. Please, hurry now," Cerise announced, motioning for the gates of the palace to be opened.

They did so at their normal slow pace, but that morning it seemed almost like a prediction, a presage of events to come, creaking and moaning mournfully. The group bid a tacit farewell to Cerise and Vertigo palace and proceeded out of the gate, where they knew not what awaited them. They had been trained extensively on their swords as well as their powers for the months they had occupied Vertigo and had been unmolested, but they still felt unprepared to face anything affiliated with the cruel queen they had met when they had first arrived in Aradain. Though most still felt uncomfortable with a sword, James was by far the most skilled and cunning warrior armed with a blade of the group. He had fallen in love with the elegant weapon the instant it had been placed in his hands, and had trained vivaciously with it. He thought it just, however, since he lacked any sufficient powers for fighting, and saw no other reason for it.

Too soon for the group, the ridge came into view, the mass of the resistance army lined obediently under the strict word of a decorated soldier astride a noble horse at the front. He bowed respectfully to the messengers and took his place in the ranks as Ash sauntered judiciously to the front. "Today, your skills will be tested! Lives will be lost, but they will be honored as heroes in the hearts of those who will be liberated by our efforts! Fight with vigor! Fight for the goodness of the rightful rule for Aradain! Fight for your freedom!" Ash cried raising the fire blade as he spoke.

A cheer of agreement rose from the crowd as the rest of the messengers raised their blades in valor to meet Ash's in the air. The stones in the tips sparkled with life and James smiled as he looked down the makeshift row, but that quickly faded. All the stones had sparked to life, all except for Jessie's. "Just the sun's not hitting it right from this angle, that's all," he assured himself and turned to the most terrifying sight he had yet seen in his new world.

The alliance army slowly began to materialize, a living breathing entity, writing in a huddled mass opposite their edge of the small valley. The sun glinted off the small river that ran through it, bounced off it and reflected the light from resistance blade and shield, to alliance blade and shield, filling the area with an eerie

foreboding light. "When I give word we charge," Ash hissed. There was no answer save for the silent, yet mutual nod.

A single glint was seen by all as the man, astride a noble steed situated at the head of Vinetra's army raised his blade to meet the challenge, hollering something indecipherable. Though no one understood the few words the leader said, they understood very well the wave of men that poured from over the ridge like a tsunami of destruction. "For the powers, and the resistance!" Ash screamed charging forward. "Resistance!" the rest of the messengers echoed and followed their leader.

There was a dull roar of voices that sounded in the still platinum light of early morning, the mist of the valley muffling most of it, but there was not a Pokemon, nor human in the area that did not cry out in anguish when the first steel met steel in the first battle of the two opposing political sides of Aradain. Blood was upon the hands of James nearly instantly as he met the challenge of the alliance, driving the blade of the wind swiftly through the nearest soldier's gut. It he pulled it out swiftly with a sickening sound, and ducked as a nearby soldier succumbed to Pikachu's mighty thunder shock attack, heightened in power considerably.

James smiled at the rodent, finding only slightly ironic that he had just saved a former enemy's life. "Don't just gawk James! Fight!" he instructed, felling another assailant. James nodded, stabbing a soldier in the back, relieving a resistance man of a threat. "You!" he looked up suddenly to see a very familiar, and at the same time very unpleasant face. "You!" he echoed recognizing Rill, the man who had been at the alliance camp when he and Jessie had been captured.

Rill dismounted his horse and sent it running, not caring where. "So we meet again, this time, you and your precious girl will not escape with your lives!" he hissed and lunged forward, blade aimed at James' heart. He parried the blow, deflecting it to one side deftly. "You'll have to do better than that!" he said with relish, striking back. Metal clashed against its own kind, crying out in protest and Rill was forced to step back. "All skeleton and no muscle I see!" James mused, squirming under the pressure of the disquieting stalemate. "I've just begun!" Rill shouted throwing the locked swords to the side.

Jessie spilled the entrails of an alliance soldier with relish, finally clearing her path for the moment and wiped her brow, looking up to see her flame laced companion. Ash seemed to be fine, roasting a small group with a well-aimed blast of fire from the palm of his hand, and for the moment it seemed the resistance would prevail, until she heard James cry out in pain. "Huh? James?!" she called cupping her hands to project her voice. "If anything's happened to him I'll-" she stopped as she witnessed her friend fall to the ground under the boot of the man she recognized from the alliance camp.

Rill touched the tip of his blade to James' throat grinning broadly, and the winged young man shut his eyes, awaiting the inevitable. "Too bad, you really put up quite a fight, but I must say it's pretty pathetic for one of the great' messengers!" he mused drawing a small drop of blood. "You lowlife son of a bitch, do you have a shred of dignity in you?" James asked spitefully. Rill looked up, cocked his

head to one side thoughtfully and grinned. "No," he answered.

James opened his eyes and spotted the blade of the sword lying in the blood stained grass a mere few feet away and tensed as he felt Rill's sword trace down his chest lightly. "I'll make sure you die slowly and painfully," he mused twirling the tip gently on the metal inlays of James' armor, "move and I'll gut you slowly." "Yep," James agreed, noting Rill's undefended legs, "the feeling is mutual!" His leg shot out, tripping the thin man who stood above him, the sword toppling harmlessly at James' side before he scrambled to his feet, snatching his blade from the ground.

Rill snarled in contempt as he found himself at the mercy of his former captor his eyes laced with the fire of hate. "You have beaten me, kill me in the fashion you see fit," he muttered, closing in his eyes in anticipation of death. Instead, his ears resounded with the hiss of metal against leather as James re-sheathed his sword. Rill opened his eyes to see James' back and wings moving away slowly, and sat up to his knees, grabbing his sword greedily into his palm. "Coward! Why do you not kill me!?" he shouted. James stopped turning over his shoulder, and smiled as he saw Jessie watching him, overjoyed to see him safe. "Because I have a sense of honor," he replied and continued on his path.

Jessie's eyes turned from her friend to Rill, as he stood, in what seemed like slow motion, sword poised for the kill. "Bastard! I'll kill you!" he shouted as loud as his lungs would allow and lunged for James.

Jessie, completely disregarding her own safety, reached out to James as she sprinted in his direction. "James! No!" she cried throwing herself in front of the enraged alliance captain. He roared in anger, and all James heard as time slowed to a near stop, was a small, feminine gasp of pain and the sickening crunch of metal passing through flesh. His jaw fell open as he whirled around to look behind him and his vision clouded with sheer terror at what his eyes met with.

Jessie and Rill stood in the same position they had been in, Rill lunging forward, but his blade had found a different mark than he had intended and it now stood driven deeply through Jessie's stomach, the sharpened tip protruding grotesquely far from her back. "James Ughnnn" she moaned as Rill put a foot harshly next his blade, removing the impaled Jessie from it with a forceful and condescending shove of his boot. "No!" James cried as she hit the ground with an unnatural thud, blood already forming a pool beneath her.

James dropped to his knees at her side, and gathered her into his lap with shaking hands. "Jessie? Jessie no! No please! Don't let this happen!" he wailed, tears sliding down his cheeks. She lay still in his arms, and Rill smiled in victory. "Perhaps I will kill you in the most painful way possible," he mused, and sliding his sword back into its home, he walked casually away, leaving Jessie and James.

A sob escaped James' throat as Jessie didn't respond to his pleas and he shook her gently, hoping to awaken her. "Please don't leave me Jessie! You can't do this to me! Don't die Jessie! Don't die!" he wailed. Jessie opened her eyes slightly at this, putting a hand to her wound, followed by James'. She looked up at him balefully, and gently wiped a tear from his cheek with a bloody thumb, leaving a

crimson streak. "James, tell me again, about our last days of Team Rocket," she whispered quietly. James held her closer as to hear her softening voice, and drew in a shaky breath. "Well, we screwed up, and the boss-" Jessie interrupted him, "no, I want to hear about just you and me, and how we helped each other."

James felt a small wave of hot blood flow over his fingers, and he sniffed back the tears to speak. "I was really hurt, but you were there, and you took care of me, and you wouldn't let me die. You never gave up on me, you never let me admit to myself that I was dying, and you saved my life, we pulled through, both of us, together," he said quietly. Jessie nodded and smiled warmly. "We always did everything together didn't we?" she asked gently. "Yes Jessie we did, and we still will, you'll make it Jessie, just like you did for me, I won't let you die," James hissed through clenched teeth.

Jessie shed a single tear, pressing her hands against the profusely bleeding wound harder, squeezing her eyes shut in pain as she felt a trickle of blood run from the corner of her mouth. "I'm not going to make it James," she said somberly, spitting the coppery taste out of her mouth. James stifled a wail of agony and worked his fingers into hers. "No, you will, I won't let you die. I won't! You didn't give up on me, I won't give up on you!" he said. "Say goodbye James, please, for me," Jessie begged. James let the tears fall more freely resting his forehead against Jessie's pale and chilled one. "I'll never say goodbye, ever, because you'll never leave me, you only say goodbye if you're never going to see someone again," he answered bitterly. Jessie thought for a brief moment, before attaining a furious air of nobility. "James, if you're truly my friend, draw my sword," she instructed, her voice growing softer as the essence of life slowly flowed from her body. James did so, and the purple stone flashed dully and somberly at its dying owner.

As if it knew what to do, James felt it pull itself into the ground, lodging there securely and Jessie smiled at it warmly. She tightened her grip of James' hand and stared straight into his panicked emerald eyes. "James, listen, and listen carefully, I'm not going to last much longer, but I want you to run, Ash is going to call a retreat in just a few seconds, and I don't want you to take me. I'm going to die, and it's too late," Jessie said sternly. "No! No, you will not die, and I won't leave you!" James protested.

Jessie motioned toward the battlefield where they both witnessed a resistance soldier fall to the wrath of a green cloaked demon. Ash was revealed behind them, and he narrowly avoided a beheading before stabbing the alliance soldier sharply through the abdomen. "Ash we can't hold out much longer! We've got to get out of here!" Brock called. Ash gritted his teeth, obviously thinking, and sheathed his sword. "Retreat! Everyone get out of here now!" he screamed.

What few resistance soldiers heard him fled instantly, and Ash ushered them towards the palace. "Misty! Get them back, I'm going to find Jessie and James!" Ash called valiantly over the commotion of the fleeing soldiers. "Right!" she answered as Ash instantly spotted the two comrades, noting in particular the now red grass beneath them. "Shit, oh god please no! Jessie!" he cried sliding on his knees to kneel beside her.

His suspicions were confirmed, however, as she regarded him sternly.

"Ash, get James out of here," she said weakly. Ash stifled his own sobs as he acknowledged the futility of her situation and Jessie closed her eyes and fell limp in James' arms as Ash hauled him to his feet. "I'll always be with you James, and I'll always be your best friend." James wailed her name repeatedly in anguish as he heard her last words to him, reaching out for her as Ash dragged him away. "Jessie! No! Please! Don't let this happen! Don't do this to me! Jessie! Jessie!"

"Rill? Um, aren't we going to follow them?" a lowly soldier at his side asked. "Naw, let's let them wallow in their defeat, they can stew over the death of one of the messengers, and we will celebrate our step closer to victory of all of Aradain!" he replied, beckoning his army to follow him to a victory party at camp.

Jessie's vision slowly faded to black as death overcame her and, struggling to open her eyes, she held James in her vision one last time. She closed them willingly now that she had seen him again, allowing her mind to slip away, her last thoughts a message to her best friend. "Goodbye James."

## 5. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 5: Scars of the Past

Chapter 5: Scars of the Past

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\_"Margaret," \_The voice resounded in her skull, beating against the sore interior relentlessly. Senses were dull, but as she slowly regained consciousness, she could sense a sharp biting pain lying in wait to agonize her. "Huh? What? Where am I?" she asked in response. She opened her eyes only to find they met with an inky blackness. \_"Wake up Margaret."\_ She wrinkled her nose at the voice again, and attempted to sit up, only to find that the white-hot pain seared through her body. \_"Don't move now, your wounds have not yet been healed."\_ Margaret resigned to her fate, resting again on the cold stone she now recognized under her. "Where am I? And why am I on stone?" she asked practically. \_"Ask no questions yet Margaret, the answers will come later."\_

Cerise stared blankly at Ash who could barely relate the story of the battle over his sobs, he wiped the tears from his cheeks and sat down next to Misty, who held an uncontrollably sobbing James tightly. "She's gone, I can't believe it," she moaned not bothering to wipe her tears away. "I loved her, I loved her with all of my heart, and now she's been taken away from me by that god damned Rill! I'll ensure his soul rots in hell!" James cried into Misty's shoulder. "What?" she asked not hearing what he had said. "Rill's going to rot in hell, I'll kill him if it's the last thing I ever do," James hissed, hoping no one had heard him say he loved Jessie.

Cerise regarded the group solemnly, drumming her fingers on the table restlessly. "The resistance suffered heavy losses today, I can only hope the alliance felt the same," she said. "Well the alliance didn't lose their best friend!" James wailed. Misty attempted to quiet him, but his sorrow would not be consoled. "Shhh, everything will be okay, we'll all miss her, and she was a great friend, but we'll all be



okay, when the pain dulls, and her death isn't so fresh in our hearts," Misty whispered, running her hand through James' cerulean hair down to his wings. "Oh Misty, I miss her so much already, you have no idea what she meant," James sobbed.

Meowth, who had been silent, pressed his back into James' body further, hoping for comfort and to comfort. "I know James, I was dere when youse two got rescued, she wouldn't leave ya, no matter how much I told her ta save herself," he said. This only caused James to sob harder, clutching the cat to him lovingly. "HerHer sword," he choked. "What?" Ash asked laying a hand on his shoulder. "She left her sword so we couldWe could come back for her, and give her a proper burial, instead of letting her stay out there on the battlefield! And her sword will be the only thing I'll have left to-" he stopped suddenly, as if remembering something and smiled.

"Or maybe she's not dead!" James cried excitedly, leaping to the window. He looked to the darkening skies and pressed his forehead against the icy glass. "She was still alive when we left! Right?" he asked turning to the rest of the group. His eager face fell as theirs did and Ash stepped forward, laying a hand on James' shoulder. "James," he started, choking at the tightness of his throat, "as much as we all wish Jessie was still with us, sheShe couldn't possibly have-" he trailed off, his own tears preventing further speaking.

There was a silence, and James wiped the tears furiously away from his cheeks, scowling. "Well I'm going anyway," he muttered and stormed out the door. "James wait, don't!" Misty called after him, but Ash stopped her. "He's suffering Misty, leave him alone," he said. Misty pressed her hand against her chest somberly, tears sliding silently down her pale cerulean cheeks. "I still can't believe she's gone," she whispered. "Someone should go and make sure James doesn't kill himself," Riley muttered.

Misty whirled around and decked the dragon firmly. "Shut up!" she snarled. "No, he's right, someone should make sure James is okay, I'll go," Ash said starting for the door. "Ash," Misty said quietly, and he turned around. "Be careful." He nodded and followed the hall out of the palace and proceeded to where he knew James would be.

The battleground still lay littered with bodies of soldiers who had given their lives in the effort and as James dropped deftly from the sky, he let his jaw drop in horror. "My god," he breathed placing a hand over his mouth. It hadn't seemed as bad as it looked now in the heat of the moment, when the valley had rung with the clash of swords and the screams of the wounded and dying. The tears ran harder as he remembered Jessie had died that day too, and James cursed the cruel hand fate had dealt him. "What did I do?" he sobbed quietly, "what did I do to deserve this? Why take Jessie from me? The only person I ever loved."

He picked his way carefully through the bodies, recognizing and wincing at a few, looking for the spot where his best friend had died in his arms. A familiar purple glint caught his eye and he sighed as he prepared himself to find her. He closed his eyes, not wanting to ever see Jessie dead and stopped when he deducted he must be close and opened one eye furtively.

The sword of the mind still stood erect, but contrary to what James

had expected, Jessie did not lie in front of it. "NNo," he breathed falling to his knees. "God, she leaves me and now I can't even bury her properly?! What did I ever do to deserve this!?" he cried to the sky. He lurched forward with his sobs, burying his face in his hands and glared at the sword without an owner. "I still love you Jessie, whether you're with me or not," he whispered pulling the blade from its anchored spot.

Before Jessie had died, the purple stone had been full of life, just as the clear stone in his sword was, but as if to rub her death in James' face more, the sword itself seemed dead. James cradled it gently in his arms, starting for the hill that the sun was only then beginning to set behind. Suddenly struck with inspiration James lifted himself gently a few feet in the air and arrived at the crest of the hill sooner.

He lighted at the top, and smiled vaguely at the spectacular view. A long stretch of Aradain bathed in the orange light of sundown awaited him, and he let the tears fall unabashed. It was just as beautiful as his Jessie had been, the perfect place for a grave if he had the body to lay to rest. The rolling hills, fields, lakes and forests were all visible from one of the taller hills in the area and James closed his eyes as he felt a warm wind caress his face and toss his hair playfully in comfort. "This is for you Jessie!" He whispered and drove the sword into the ground, as a final remembrance of his best friend. He closed his eyes, bowing respectfully, and placed a hand wistfully of the small makeshift monument. "May this stand forever in your memory, Jess," he whispered mournfully.

James sighed deeply, and jumped as he felt a gentle touch on his shoulder. He whirled around, and softened his expression at Ash. "Hey James," he said. "How do you cope Ash?" James asked, never taking his gaze away from the sunset. "With what?" the boy replied. "With losing something you loved more than life itself," James said bitterly. Ash sighed and sat on the ground, James echoed his sigh and took a spot next to him on the warm grass. "James, I really don't think you treasured Jessie more than your own life, I know you loved her, but you'll forget after a while. When the pain isn't so fresh," he whispered wiping away his own tears. "Ash you don't understand," James said with difficulty, "you wouldn't begin to."

Ash put his arm around James' shoulders and plucked a bit of grass from beneath him. "Try me, I'm not dumb," he said. This only caused James to burst into a fit of sobs, as if he had been reminded of something extremely painful and, alarmed, Ash embraced him lovingly. "Oh geez, I'm so sorry James, I'm so sorry! You don't have to tell me," he cursed beginning to cry harder himself.

James slowly sat up, backing out of Ash's arms and wrapping his own about his waist. "No, if I don't tell someone, I swear I'll find no other choice but to kill myself, and you're the only one who knows I loved Jessie," he started. Ash nodded as James drew in a deep breath, shaky with tears and stared straight through him with piercing emerald eyes. "Jessie and I have been through more things together than I could possibly tell you in one day, but there's one in particular that changed our relationship forever. It was when I realized I did love her, and always had, from the moment I laid eyes on her, and that we were supposed to be together."

"But we were sick of failing, and we were just about to quit, when

Giovanni finally caught up with us. He decided the latest failure was the last straw, and heHe got us Ash, he had Jessie watch as they beat me, whipped me and stabbed me. They were going to anyway, but like an idiot I tried to escape, normally it would have been only the whip, but the knives came out when I started to struggle. I tried to save us both, but only ended up with my hand shredded and a lot more wounds than I really needed. Look at my hand! I still have the scars, especially this one," he said extending the scarred hand and turning it over so Ash could view his wrist, "This one almost took my life."

Ash fingered the ugly pink line wincing in empathy as James pulled it back. "Do you know what it feels like to be dying?" James asked in a low voice. "No, I don't," Ash answered solemnly. "I do, I was, and very slowly. They slit my wrist, and with the other wounds I hand, I was bleeding to death. It was the worst feeling I've ever had in my life. I kept thinking of what Jessie and Meowth were going to do without me, if Giovanni would kill them too, or if they would escape. I even told Jessie to take care of my Pokemon for me, but it made her cry so I didn't ask again. I kept thinking about all the things I hadn't done, things I'd never get to do again, and things I would never get to do period. I can honestly tell you, that when you think you're going to die, or you know it, it's the most depressing thing in the world. You want to be as close as humanly possible to your loved ones, but Jess was the closest thing I had to family, I even began to consider her it, and if I had to die, dying in her arms was were I wanted to be. When I felt myself slipping, I tried to say goodbye to her, I tried so hard! But- But she wouldn't hear of it!" James had to pause, his sobbing breaking his speech.

Ash listened on in horror, the story of what had happened to his friends back in the old world, the story he had a glimpse of in Vinetra's labyrinth, the story only Jessie and James knew, was finally being told verbally. "Dear God James, II had no idea," he breathed placing a hand on his back. James swallowed his sobs hard and stared harder at the twilight colored landscape his brows knitting deeply. "I'm not done yet," he whispered harshly, "sheShe wouldn't even let me say I was dying, even though I knew in my heart I was, she bound my wrist in strips from her own uniform! Even though she desperately needed it to keep warm in that cell. I told her to save herself. She told me she'd rather die by my side along with me than live alone. God, when she told me that, I wanted to kiss her, as passionately as I possibly could, tell her I loved her and we'd be together forever, but I couldn't. God damn it, why couldn't I have told her? Now she'll never know, we'll never be together. But aside from that, she saved my life Ash, in more ways than one. If you can possibly understand when I say this, she wouldn't let me die. Her confidence, and optimism, her encouragement, even her first aide skills, and her undying friendship pulled me through. She's the only reason I'm still alive right now, she was my only ray of hope, and even on top of that, I loved her more than anything, and she was my best and only friend."

James wailed as he tearfully finished his tale, burying his face into his knees which he held drawn in close to his chest. "Damn! Damn it, why?! I don't understand, why would this happen? This has to totally be a fluke, this can't happen!" Ash sobbed burying his face into James' shoulder. "I'm not meant to be happy, that's why. Fate gave me parents who didn't love me, and took the one person who did away, I'm not supposed to love or be loved," James replied bitterly. "James

don't say that, you still have us, and we all love you," Ash said forcefully. "I don't want to live, I want to be with her! I can't stand it!" the winged young man sobbed.

Ash pulled James close to him, feeling his shoulders shake violently with his sobs. "I failed her Ash, she wouldn't let me die, and I let her. It's all my fault," he whispered embracing his friend back. "No, don't you dare say that James, she died a noble death, and you couldn't do anything to stop it," the boy assured him. "SheShe lost her life, to save mine," James added, "I could have killed Rill, right then and there, but it felt wrong to me, it was dirty, and I didn't think it was fair at all to kill an unarmed man, he wouldn't stand for it. He was going to kill me but Jessie, she- she took the blade for me. I should be lying dead on the battlefield, Jessie should be here at my grave, not me at hers. It's all my fault! If I had killed him, Jessie would still be alive, and so would I, and we could be together," James sobbed.

Ash didn't have an answer for him, and aside from holding him as he sobbed, the boy could do nothing to console his own spirits, or his friend's. James did indeed have a noble sense of valor Ash had not known he possessed, but it had cost him the life of a friend. "No James, don't blame yourself, don't blame yourself," he promised. James said nothing in response as the boy draped his arm about his shoulders and stood, helping him to his feet. "Come on James, we all need some rest, lets go home," he said.

James didn't object as they started back for the palace, simply looking at the ground, tears still sliding from his cheeks to the bloodied ground as he whispered a final message to his best friend. "GoodbyeJess."

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"I still wanna know what's going on," her senses had returned, and though the pain still threatened to sear at her entire body, she had regained strength, and was interrogating to strange voice that spoke to her. \_"All will be revealed in due time Margaret, just rest for now," \_she wrinkled her nose at this, frowning deeply. "Wh-Why do you keep calling me Margaret? That's not my name," she said forcefully. \_"It is and you know it is,"\_ the voice answered. "No! It isn't! No one calls me that!" \_"Your Mother did, until you told her not to,"\_ Tears stung at the corners of Margaret's eyes as she remembered. "ItIt is my name, but I hate that name," she answered. \_"What shall I call you then? What name do you go by?"\_ "II can't remember."

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James opened his burning eyes as he heard his door slowly creak open and looked up into a second pair of emeralds. He frowned at the boy and sighed deeply as he didn't smile at him as he normally would. "Ugh, leave me alone Jasper, I need to think," he muttered turning over on his bed. "About Jessie?" James winced at her name and forced himself to stop the tears before they ran again. "Jasper, Jessie's-" "Dead, I know," he said before James could finish.

James was silent as Jasper clambered up onto the bed with him and wrapped his arm about his shoulders lovingly. "You'll still take care of me, right James?" he asked. James stifled another sob as he rolled

back over to face Jasper, hugging him close. "I'll always be here for you Jasper, and I will take care of you," he said tearfully.

The winds, in response to their messenger's sorrow, had begun to blow more violently as a light rain began to fall and a low, mournful clap of thunder sounded above the land as James and Jasper fell asleep, tears on both their faces.

"I-I can't remember my name! Except Margaret, I think I went by my middle name, but I don't know what that is! I can't remember anything! What's going on?" Margaret wailed beginning to cry. \_"I cannot help you, but I can show you something that may help,"\_ the voice said. "Please, please do," Margaret replied. \_"Not yet, you'd be blinded, I'll put this here and start it off dim to get your eyes used to the light,"\_ the voice said. "Why can't I use them? How long have they been closed?" Margaret asked, panicked. \_"A very long time, please just rest,"\_ the voice said forcefully. "No! I have to see what's going on! I have to remember! Something anything! Do I even have a past? Who am I?" Margaret wailed.

She heard a sigh, and a tiny purple flicker started near her feet. She calmed at it, and settled back down on the cold stone. She found the strength to place a hand on her stomach, and winced in pain. \_"Your wounds will be gone soon, lie still and I will finish healing you,"\_ the voice said. Margaret nodded and bit her tongue as a mild electric sensation passed through her body. She cried out weakly in pain, squeezing her eyes shut as it intensified. "Stop!" she yelped as a searing pain shot through her abdomen.

As if to respond, the pain ceased, and her body felt renewed, and fresh, as if she had never been wounded at all. Had she been able to see, Margaret would have sat up to see what had been healed, but knowing that it was not possible, she relaxed a bit more and reclined easily. "You, you healed me," she whispered in awe. \_"Yes I did, and soon you shall know everything, why you're here, what purpose you serve to me, and even who you are,"\_ the voice said, and a shadow was suddenly visible in the purple light.

Margaret frowned at it, and sat up. "Show yourself, if I'm your captive, I at least want to see you!" she said. "The light is too dim, but I will tell you my name, I am known as Shadow, mistress of the powers of dark and the mind, you will see my natural form when your eyes are ready, shall I increase your light?" Shadow asked. Margaret nodded and squinted as the light grew brighter. "I can take it, more," she muttered. "But I don't-" "More damn it!" The light increased considerably and Margaret was forced to stop.

She smiled at the warm purple glow and cocked her head to one side thoughtfully. "That light, it seems so familiar, can't you tell me who I am now Shadow?" she asked. "You must remember on your own, but I will help, but for the power's sake rest now! Too much exertion and you'll kill yourself, and I know you don't want that," Shadow said. Margaret was forced to accept this answer and laid back down with a loud sigh.

The rain had fallen for days, and James had spent these days locked in his room. He had only allowed Jasper to visit him, and the only time he was ever seen was in the evenings, when he went back to Jessie's grave at twilight. This greatly disturbed the rest of the messengers, and they finally decided to do something about it. They

chose Ash to represent them, since James had seemed to turn to him the most, and though he hated to break his friend's heart, Ash agreed and reluctantly entered the silent room.

James sat up as he heard the boy enter, and he stopped a few feet from the bed in which the winged young man had not left since Jessie's death. "James, we've been talking, and we need you to touch base with reality. You're losing yourself, and we're losing you. I'm afraid we can't let you go to Jessie's grave anymore," he explained gently. James' jaw dropped and a quiet sob escaped his throat as the seemingly perpetual tears began again. Ash looked away from the utterly shocked and horrified expression on James' face as he sat in his bed and wiped the tear that slid down his cheek. "No! You can't do this to me!" he wailed.

Ash sat at the foot of the bed and put a hand on James' shin affectionately. "I'm sorry, but it's for the best, you can go one last time tonight to say goodbye, but after that you'll stay here. You need to get back into the real world, Jessie's gone, and you can't bring her back. We need you, and you have to get over it. For your sake and the sake of Aradain," he said. James looked to the window and got up silently, never taking his gaze away from the storm outside. "I caused this didn't I?" he asked. "Don't change the subject James," Ash shot back angrily.

James turned over his shoulder, freezing Ash with the malice in his eyes and snatched a piece of paper from the table. "How could you do this to me? I thought you knew how I felt, but I guess I was wrong," he muttered brushing past him to the door. Ash watched him go, his tangled, unkempt tail dragging listlessly after him long after James was no longer visible. "Don't be out too late, oh yeah, and I'm sorry," he said sighing.

Jasper, who had remained silent throughout the entire conversation, moved to Ash's side and laid a hand on his shoulder. "James lost the other half of his soul, don't be so hard on him," he said. Ash was speechless as the little boy hopped off the bed and walked briskly out of the room, wondering how on earth a boy that young could've come up with something like that himself.

James fought the winds and driving rain as he flew to the hill crest which bore his precious sword one last time. He lighted at the base as he always did, and climbed the slope by foot and smiled vaguely as the sword glinted in what little gray sunlight there was left in the day. He cradled the small package he had brought from his room in his hands wistfully and knelt in front of the blade of the mind. "They told me I can't come here anymore, I'm scaring them and I don't want to, so this will be my last visit here. Just know that I love you, and I miss you Jess, and I hope we can be together again someday," he whispered.

He kissed the small package he held in his hands lovingly, and undid the delicate strings that bound it. He cupped his hand and pressed the paper into it as to keep the coarse black seeds inside the makeshift packet and used his free hand to dig in the wet earth. "This will remind you that I'll never forget you, and I'll always love you," he whispered as the small hole at the base of the makeshift monument grew to his desired size. He dumped the seeds into it and gingerly covered it with the loose soil. "These should do well here," he whispered and unfolded the piece of paper he still held in

his hands.

James sighed and wiped tears and rain from his cheeks and looked fondly on the text he had written himself. "I'll always remember this Jess, and you,"

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"You protected me from devastation

You filled my life with jubilation

You completed my heart with warmth and love

Even now that you rest in the stars above

To you, Jessie

From, James

Though you're gone from my life, you'll always be here

And I'll always have the memories, which I hold dear"

—

He tied the poem, a symbolic version of his old motto he had shared with Jessie to the delicately coiled metal of Jessie's sword with the string that had bound the packet of seeds he had gathered from Cerise's garden. He had painstakingly collected them from the reddest roses he could possibly find there and had decided to plant them at Jessie's grave. They reminded him of her in a pleasant way, of kinder times, and the reasons he loved her so he thought it just that they should stand as a more suiting memorial than merely her sword.

James smiled at the now complete memorial and turned to go, but stopped as an icy wind whipped past his ear, whispering a scant message to him. "What? What did you say?" he said panic suddenly gripping him. \_"Don't give up hope," \_James closed his eyes at this and covered his ears. "Shut up! What do you mean?" he screamed to the now raging winds. The winds spoke to him again and he gritted his teeth and pressed his hands harder to his ears. "Damn you! Shut the hell up! That's not true!" he snarled. The winds repeated their message and James collapsed into the wet and muddy grass, regardless of what happened to his feathers and clothing, sobbing uncontrollably. "That isn't true! It isn't! It can't be! She's dead she's dead! She died in my arms! Her blood was on my hands! She can't still be alive! Stop telling me she is!" he screeched to the wind.

It only howled louder and lighting ripped the black fabric of the sky in two as James stood up defiantly. "Shut the hell up, I'm not listening to you! You're lying to me!" he cried. The winds were silenced as another, even larger bolt of electricity split a distant tree, engulfing it into starving flames. The storm quelled, and the winds rustled the grass where James had just been standing, only to find him gone.

Ash was awakened with a jolt at the thunder and sat bolt upright in bed. He put a hand to his forehead, breathing heavily, and slipped

noiselessly from his bed. He walked to the window, wondering if James had yet returned and raised an eyebrow as he spotted Brock and Cerise standing near the gate. He frowned and shut his curtains, moving to his closet to dress and join them.

He threw his clothes on haphazardly and, grabbing his sword on the way out of his room, made his way quickly to the courtyard. "Hey Brock! Cerise! What's going on?" he called over the rain. Brock turned around and beckoned him to join them at the gate. "Where is he?!" "I told you I don't know, he left at sundown and hasn't returned yet," Cerise explained to a citizen of Vertigo. "Then we'll go find the bastard! We'll hunt him down and hang his wings from the clock tower in Vertigo!" the same gruff man replied.

Brock sighed. "You have to understand, James' emotions affect the winds, he's going through tough times, the winds have simply brought these storms. They'll pass I promise you," he said and Ash finally understood. "But our homes have already been flooded! Crops ruined! Even if they were to stop right now the damage would still be done! Come comrades! Let us find that traitor ourselves!" he cried.

All present winced as a cheer of agreement rose from the crowd and they moved in a mutual mass away from the city gates. "May the seven powers protect him," Cerise breathed putting a hand to her chest, "but if that idiot gets himself killed its no skin off my nose." She flipped her now wet hair over her shoulder and sauntered back into the palace. "Reminds me of Jessie," Ash breathed mournfully. Brock nodded. "Yeah, but we'd better find James and fast if we want him back alive," he said motioning to the guard to open the gate.

The man nodded the affirmative and the ancient gate slowly creaked open, landing with a dull thud on the wet ground. "Let's go," Brock said wrapping the cloak he wore around him tighter and dashing quickly onto the dirt path leading away from the palace. Ash nodded and sprinted after his friend, shielding his eyes from the stinging droplets of rain.

James had decided to walk after soaking his wings in the rain and didn't even look up from the ground as the winds whispered a warning into his ears. "Shut up and leave me alone," he snarled at them. They left him then, tired of his attitude and rustled the leaves of the trees one last time in mourning.

James scowled at them, annoyed that they had betrayed him, filling his mind with lies and further tormenting his already broken soul. He sighed deeply and lifted his head, brushing his now soaking wet blue hair behind his ears and out of his face.

A glimmer of light in the distance caught his eye and he stopped, shading his eyes from the vicious, needle sharp flurry of rain that now fell, and the glimmer increased in magnitude. "What the-" he muttered stepping forward as to see more clearly. The light split into several easily distinguished points of light, and angry yelling was audible.

James tensed and took a step backward, a feeling of foreboding suddenly gripping him. "Look! There's the traitor!" he heard someone yell. James didn't even have time to react before an arrow sailed deftly and stealthily through the air, narrowly missing his head. He turned to run, but was struck in the back by a large stone and



slipped in the mud, landing face down into the wet dirt path.

James only had to wait a few seconds before the mob was upon him, and he felt the first enraged boot find his side, crying out in pain. "Oh so the infallible messenger feels pain? Well how about this!" James shut his eyes against everything, but wailed in sheer agony as he felt cold steel pierce through his shoulder. "Get him up! We'll chop his wings off while he's still breathing!" The assailing intensified, rocks, fists and sticks coming from unknown places and James stopped the struggle. "Please just let me die now," he thought bitterly to himself, "I'll be with Jessie then."

James winced with a bruised eye as he felt the cold wet blade of a dagger at the base of his left wing, and braced himself for the pain. "Hope ya can live through this! I wanna kill ya meself!" James let a single tear fall from beneath closed lids. Was this what his destiny was? To die in the mud murdered by the same people he had fought so hard to protect? Lost Jessie to protect? "Hey! Leave him alone!" He recognized Ash's enraged voice as the roar of fire resounded close to him. He allowed his mangled body to drop to the wet ground as the townspeople fled and lay still. He could hear the sound of their footsteps fleeing in terror and he finally relaxed, but groaned at every move.

Ash let his outstretched hand fall to his side as he knelt next to the still form of his friend. "James? Oh god, if only we'd stopped them at the castle. James!" he hissed, tears gathering in his eyes. "I lifted him once, I can do it again, move," Brock instructed and Ash allowed him to gently lift James from the ground. "I won't let us lose him too," he said firmly.

Ash let the tears fall discreetly as he watched Brock carry the limp, lifeless form of his friend that had once been happy. He had been in love, and finally free of all oppression he had endured whilst a member of Team Rocket. Now as he watched, he saw a mere shell of that former person, even unconscious, he face was still twisted with mental and physical pain. His filthy wings drooped listlessly from between Brock's arms and dragged in the mud, as did the once lustrous tail. He bled from a dozen different wounds, his still shoulder length blue hair hung tangled, wet and dirty, and Ash almost wished he could be dead.

James struggled to open the eye that wasn't throbbing in pain as it swelled and bruised and held Brock's stern gray face in his vision. He closed the eye after that, knowing he was with friends and allowed the dark to claim him, slipping slowly out of consciousness.

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White, blinding and bright was all there was. He struggled to keep his eyes open to see where he was, but it was literally impossible. The light shifted, and as James was finally able to view it, a black void was just barely discernible just ahead of him. He struggled to run forward to it, but found himself securely rooted to the spot, unable to move any part of his body. He opened his mouth to scream when the ground pitched and he suddenly felt himself being hurled forward, stopping suddenly at a frighteningly familiar figure.

Her loose red hair hung just below her waist and she wore a long

flowing gown of white, both being tossed lazily by an unfelt breeze. James knew where he was now and smiled, he had died and he was in heaven with his Jessie. She turned around slowly and upon seeing him, her jaw dropped in horror. James' spirits sank as she looked back to the black void and reached out to him as a tendril of the inky bane shot froth from the center, wrapping itself about her waist and drawing her back into it. "James! Help!" was the only utterance as she slipped back into the ravine of darkness. James reached out to her as it exploded with a bright flash of light and fell to the ground with the force, a dull roar the only sound audible.

Misty jumped as James shot bolt upright in bed, screaming Jessie's name at the top of his lungs. He stopped, standing stark still for a moment before drawing in a deep breath and looking to her quizzically. "Oh, hey Misty," he muttered, his one open eye rolling back into his head as he slumped backwards down to the bed. Misty gasped and frowned deeply, continuing her previous task of cleaning the various scrapes on his forehead with a damp cloth. Meowth, who had kept a silent vigil next to his friend, returned from being tossed to the floor and purred gently against his side. "Geez James! Don't scare me like that! Are you okay?" she asked irritably. James winced against the cloth's biting coldness, but looked up to Misty mournfully. He nodded, but the despairing scowl never left his face. "Why?" he asked quietly.

Misty sighed and lovingly dabbed a fresh bead of blood away from just above his eyebrow. "The rain," she answered, understanding what he had meant. James nodded in understanding and winced in agony as he attempted to move. "My shoulder hurts," he remarked dully. Alarmed, Misty pulled back the blankets and frowned deeply at the already blood soaked bandage around his shoulder. "Shit, they really got what they wanted this time, lie still and I'll get something to clean that up with," she said and hurried from the room.

James watched her leave and shivered, not only with cold at having no shirt on and no blanket to cover himself with, but in memory of the dream as well. He jerked the thick fabric back over himself with the arm he was still able to move and sighed deeply, wondering what on earth it had meant. Normally he dreamt of Jessie, but it was never as significant as that dream had been. He closed his eyes hard, trying to think as the door creaked and he looked expectantly down to see Jasper hop, as always, enthusiastically into the room. "They told me you were hurt, and to leave Misty with you, but I had to see you! James, are you going to die?" he asked, genuinely afraid.

James managed a weak smile and placed a hand lovingly onto the boy's head. "Kid, I may have gotten the hell beaten out of me, but I won't leave you," he said affectionately. Jasper smiled briefly, but tears sprung to his eyes as he noted the mangled shoulder. "Did they stab you?" he asked gently touching it. "Yes," James replied with difficulty and felt his heart break as the little boy began to cry, gently easing himself onto the bed with his stricken friend. "The world is so awful, why do the people I love always get hurt or die?" he sobbed.

James held the boy close, kissing his forehead gently and rocking his sobbing form. "Shhh, I love you, and that's all you ever need," he assured him. "Then how do you live without Jessie?" Jasper asked through tears. The winged young man was forced to remain silent at the mention of his deceased friend and James bit his lip as he began

to cry himself, and a warm sensation began tingling in his wounded shoulder. "Just barely, just barely," he replied at length. As the sensation increased James bit his lip in discomfort and shifted his shoulder painfully. When it didn't abate at the new position, the heat persisted until he finally cried out in pain and sat up sharply, allowing the boy to drop to the bed next to him.

Jasper sat up and gasped in terror as James looked in wonder at his wounded shoulder, picking the loose end of the bandage away and unwrapping it carefully. The blood still remained, but as the last of the fabric freed his arm, the wound from the dagger was gone. "What the-" he started, but stopped as his vision clouded with white. The image of Jessie turning and screaming his name flashed before his vision again and he shut his eyes. "No! Stop torturing me!" he screamed. "James open your eyes!" Jasper exclaimed, panicked. James felt the boy shake him roughly and he complied with his wishes.

Jasper looked up at him balefully and James smiled with a sudden understanding. "The scroll," he said quietly and slipped from bed. "James you should be resting," Jasper protested following him as he changed into a clean tunic. "I don't care anymore, this is much more important than my health," he said jamming his boots on roughly. "What in Aradain could that possibly be?" Jasper asked irritated. James looked at him cynically, a smug grin spread wide across his face. "Jessie is alive, and I'm going to find her."

## 6. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 6: Shadow of a Doubt

### Chapter 6: Shadow of a Doubt

Margaret held her hand in front of her face in the dim purple light, still only barely able to distinguish its features. Something was different about it, and it didn't seem right to her, but she gave up trying to deduct what and laid it back down on her stomach. "I don't get it, obviously I was born, and I have a name and a past, but I don't remember any of it," she said anxiously, her brow furrowing with deep thought. "Try to think, don't concern yourself with the words I have to remember," but instead let the memories return on their own, they will," Shadow assured her.

Margaret sighed and looked to the still dim purple light as a deft shadow crossed it. "I want more light, maybe if I see myself I'll remember something," she said. "That's enough," Shadow answered bluntly. The girl understood the embedded message in the tone of the voice and Margaret was forced to consent to it. "Do you feel you could handle a few memories?" Shadow asked again at length. Margaret brightened, smiling warmly. "Yes! Of course! Please show me!" she piped. "Very well, close your eyes Margaret, I wish to show you something," Shadow replied cheerfully. "But-" "Don't argue!" she said impulsively. Margaret frowned, but closed her eyes as the entity bid her.

Instead of the blackness she expected, she found she could see quite clearly, and she was standing outside of a building. It was deathly quiet except for a jovial young voice shouting cheerfully. Margaret smiled at the unusually familiar setting and looked for any sign of a

memory. "Where are we?" she asked when she found nothing she knew. "Take a look at your surroundings, then see if you can tell me," Shadow's disembodied voice echoed in the hollow of her mind. Margaret shivered against the snow that was falling and looked up to the roof of the building. It was immensely dilapidated, composed of what looked like a row of tiny houses or apartment complexes.

A little girl played in the snow happily a few yards away, her long red hair sparkling with beads of water and pure snow that clung to it. She tossed a tiny snowball into the air and let it land on her head, laughing with pure delight. "Snow, snow I love it so!" she sang brightly and Margaret smiled at her antics. "Who is this child?" she asked. "She died a long time ago," Shadow answered. Margaret's face fell at the news of the untimely death of such a happy looking little girl and she sighed. "Jessie! Snowgasboard's ready!" a warm and tender voice called from the open door of one of the apartments. "Oh boy!" Jessie piped and dashed inside closing the door behind her, leaving Margaret standing alone.

She winced at the words and closed her eyes remorsefully. "Are they so poor they have to eat snow?" she asked. "Come back now Margaret," Shadow answered. "No! I have to help Jessie!" the girl answered. "Jessie is dead, this is her past self, there's nothing you can do, now come!"

Margaret felt herself rush back into the conscious world and she opened her eyes to the familiar black, tears sliding without sobs down her cheeks. "I want to see you Shadow! And I want to know what's going on! Why did you show me that little girl? Why am I always in the dark?" she asked quickly. No answer came from the inky blackness, and Margaret let the tears run harder. "Answer me!" A deep-throated, agitated growl resulted from her outburst and the brilliant white again enveloped her.

Margaret closed her eyes against the pain of the light, and didn't open them until Shadow's voice resounded in her own ears. "This is my natural form, though I do have the ability to change it," she said. Margaret opened her eyes to the sight of a sleek black cat sitting casually on a pure white background. She had absurdly large purple eyes, and her body was elongated more so than a normal cat, long lithe legs bore gold bangles, and a gold medallion hung from her neck. The medallion bore an odd symbol, an eye with delicate coiled designs around it, and it glinted cordially to Margaret as she looked on. The creature looked infinitely intelligent, perhaps even possessing powerful techniques of the mind. She smiled, baring her snow-white fangs and curled her long tail about her drawn in legs. "Welcome to my world Margaret," Shadow said, speaking human words with a feline mouth.

Margaret relaxed at finally seeing who held her captive and smiled. "Well I got one question answered, now why did you show me Jessie?" she asked, continuing the interrogation. "I had hoped it would trigger a memory, but apparently not, I shall have to show you more," Shadow said getting up. "Please follow me," she said beginning what looked like a trek with no final destination, "and whatever you do don't stop walking." Margaret nodded and followed obediently, looking for any sign of what the cat might show her next to trigger memories.

The pure white slowly faded to a lush green place, where splashing

and joyous laughing could be heard. The scenery solidified into what was obviously a small clearing in wooded areas just outside a city and as she strained her eyes farther, she could barely discern two figures, enjoying an afternoon outdoors. They were obviously children, and Margaret swore that one of them was the little Jessie she had seen before. "Who are they?" she asked in awe. "So many questions, just look and see if you remember anything," Shadow answered.

Indeed the little girl was the Jessie Margaret had seen earlier, but she was with a young boy, and the girl smiled as Jessie whooped loudly and shoved the boy into a nearby lake. He resurfaced soon after, flipping his now wet shoulder length blue hair over his shoulders, still laughing. "Try to think, Margaret, what does this remind you of?" Shadow asked softly. Margaret closed her eyes, and for a split second, an image of an older man, but with the same blue hair turning over his shoulder to smile at her flashed across her closed lids. "James!" she yelled suddenly, startling the cat from her perch.

Margaret felt tears sting the corners of her eyes as a wave of nostalgia passed over her. "I-I'm sorry, his name is James, I remember him for some reason," she replied. "I-It's weird, I remember Jessie too, she was really good friends with James, they were like joined at the hip, completely inseparable," she remarked fondly. "Good, reflect on James, think about him, what do you remember?" Shadow asked, her tail flicking nonchalantly.

Dizziness swept over Margaret's psyche as she thought of the little boy again, falling to her knees with a shriek. Shadow did nothing but watch as she jerked suddenly and her eyes rolled dramatically back into her head, falling to the ground. "Now we're getting somewhere," she mused.

Margaret again found herself faced with the white nothingness, and she swallowed hard, wondering what Shadow was putting her through. Images slowly began to take shape in front of her eyes, and she found she was lying on her back, hands behind her head. She looked up to the sky as her body slowly began to regain feeling. Her clothes were wet, but she was pleasantly warm, as it was a hot summer day and a light breeze cooled any part of her that was hot before it was too uncomfortable. "Well Jessie, what do you think that one looks like?" She jumped as she heard a familiar voice next to her.

Upon inspection, she discovered it was James who had spoken, and he lay on the ground next to her. "W-What did you just call me?" she asked incredulously. James looked confused and laid a hand gingerly on her forehead. "I think you've got a fever Jess, and now you don't even remember your own name!" he said genuinely concerned. "But, my name is Margaret!" she said sitting up. "Well I know that, but you hate your first name! You always went by your middle name!" James replied fearfully. "My middle name?" Margaret asked. "Yes!" James assured her, "Jessica, but you always go by Jessie."

Margaret felt her entire body lurch with terror and she crumpled to the ground, a sharp pain piercing her stomach. Everything was black, and the only sound audible was a dull roar of blood in her eardrums. "Jessie please don't leave me!" An anguished and terrifyingly familiar wail rose above all other sounds clearly. What was going on? She tried to open her eyes, but found her entire body ached, most of

all the white hot feeling of a sword driven through her. "Don't die Jessie! Please don't let this happen!" "Die? What had happened? The sword, Rill James" Margaret remembered. "The seven powers, Ash, and my friends, I'm not Margaret I'm-"

"Jessica Burkely, as you legally changed your name to later in life." Jessie opened her eyes and sat up violently, screaming James' name. "James! What have you done with him? And the rest of my friends? Why am I alone here?" she yelled. No answer came to her pleas, and she blinked back tears threatening to fall. "Where are you Shadow?!" she cried. Jessie reached to her side for her sword at length, but found it missing from the empty sheath that still hung there. "M-My sword," she groaned. "I feared this, I'll have to detain you," Shadow mused and Jessie felt cold metal snake around her wrists, ankles, and her still aching stomach. "No! You can't do this!" she yelled in protest.

The purple light faded to black and Jessie flinched as she felt the limber cat leap up onto the stone platform with her. She leaned close to Jessie's face, and the girl turned away from the thick probing whiskers and hot breath she could feel down her neck. "Lets see if you remember more now!" the feline hissed and Jessie felt her body paralyze. "No! Please don't!" she screamed as she felt herself begin to fall.

She remembered when James had saved her the day he learned to fly when she had fallen, and sorely wished she could have seen him one last time before she finally left the mortal coil. She sensed the ground near her and she tensed in preparation to meet her death, but found she never did hit the ground, and when she dared to open her eyes, the only sight that met them was the clear night sky.

She gasped and sat bolt upright, placing a hand to her pounding chest. "W-What?" she muttered breathlessly. The sudden movement had startled the lightly sleeping figure next to her, and he sat up swiftly to meet her. "Jess? You okay?" She whirled around to see James ease himself out of his sleeping bag and sit next to her. Jessie looked down to see that she had also been asleep, camped out by a dead fire in the middle of a forest. "James I-" she paused, noting that something was horribly wrong. She frowned at James, and put a hand on his shoulder, turning him around slightly. "What are you do-" he was interrupted by a high pitched shriek from Jessie.

He drew back in fear, but pulled Jessie into his arms as he witnessed a look of sheer terror spread across her face. "James, your wings! Your tail!" she cried, for he was just as he had been before the fateful day they had wandered into Periwinkle village. "My what?" he replied, confused. Jessie flung herself out of his arms, putting a hand to her head where the cat ears were absent. "My ears!" she looked at her hands, which now bore the fingers and bright red nails they once had, "and my claws!" She paused remorsefully, afraid to find her favorite appendage missing, and reached behind her, closing her eyes in sorrow as she found exactly what she had feared. "My tail too!" she cried.

James' expression changed to one of understanding as he embraced his friend again. "Jessie you were having a dream, it was all a dream. A freaky one, but a dream," he assured her. "It was so real. You looked like an Articuno, and I was a crossbreed of an Abra!" Jessie whispered. "Yeah I know, one time I could have sworn I was falling

off of a Ferris wheel, but I woke up before I hit the ground," James said. Jessie chuckled and relaxed, sliding out of James' arms. "Really?" she asked. James smiled wryly at her and laid back down swiftly. "Yeah, now get some sleep, we have to report in early tomorrow and believe me, the boss did not sound happy on the phone," James said frowning.

Jessie instantly felt guilty for forcing James to call in for them the previous evening. She knew how impulsive the Boss could get and James couldn't and didn't handle it well. "Night James," she whispered settling back down. "Night Jess," he replied.

Jessie smiled at his already groggy response, but that quickly faded as she reflected on her dream. Aradain, Cerise, Captain Roker, the ship, Ichtsique, all of it had seemed so real to her, and it was hard to believe that all of it had been a dream. She had felt like she really knew Ash, Misty, and Brock, and they had really been her friends. She had gone through so much, and it had seemed the dream had lasted for months, but it had all been a figment of her imagination. Jessie sighed deeply and cleared her mind to sleep, the feeling of having a tail still lingering as she drifted into a dreamless slumber.

Jessie awoke the next morning to the sounds of James and Meowth arguing loudly over something. "Well I say it's a bad idea, I tink youse should just stay here," Meowth yelled. "And then he'll be even more pissed the next time we go in! I don't know what your problem is Meowth, but if Jessie and I want our paychecks, then we've gotta report in!" James shot back. "Dis feels wrong, I don't want youse guys ta go!" Meowth said, his voice laced with tears.

Jessie sat up at this, concerned and watched silently as James embraced the feline, who had finally let the tears fall. "Oh Meowth, don't cry! Nothing's going to happen! It's okay! Please don't cry!" he assured him. "I-I know, but I just gots dis feelin'," the cat replied through his sobs, "sumthin bad's gonna happen, I don't know what, but it is!" Jessie stretched and yawned broadly, slipping out of bed and moving to where James cradled the still weeping cat in his arms lovingly by the newly re-lit fire.

She sat next to her friends and put a hand on James' shoulder smiling as the cat lifted his midnight blue eyes to hers. "Meowth we'll be fine, but why don't you stay here?" she asked softly. "No! I wanna protect ya!" he snapped instantly. James put a finger to his mouth, quieting him and smiled warmly. "Like I told you, nothing's going to happen, stay here and get some rest," he said.

Meowth sighed as he realized the futility of his situation and crawled back into his miniscule sleeping roll. "But promise me you'll wake me up da second ya get back, and if yer not back by sundown, I come ta get ya!" he said raising a claw at James. The young man pulled the soft material more tightly around his friend's chin. "Sundown, if we're not back, you can come for us, and you can even call the police if you want, but we'll be back," he promised. Meowth seemed satisfied by his answer, closing his eyes and sighing as he settled himself. James scratched the cat between the ears one last time before standing and walking back to Jessie.

He sat next to her, sighing deeply before turning to look her in the eyes. "Scared James?" she asked, seeing the look of terror in his

emerald green eyes. "Hell yeah," he replied. "Me too." He patted her shoulder affectionately as he stood and moved to pack his sleeping roll. "James, just leave it, I'll get dressed and let's go now so we don't worry Meowth," Jessie said standing. James nodded in understanding, and sat back down, as he was already in uniform, to wait for Jessie to change into hers. If they were going to see the boss, they had better be in uniform.

Jessie gathered her cleanest and most well kept uniform and changed quickly, her nerves already frayed by Meowth's panic that morning. It had scared her, for the cat had never acted that way before, and her dream the previous night did nothing to make her feel any better. Nothing felt right that morning, and even James seemed disturbed and changed by something. He normally had a quite childish and nonchalant manner, but as Jessie had already witnessed, he was acting serious for a change.

The young woman finished changing and moved to James, who still sat on his sleeping roll, chewing a fingernail nervously. "Put your gloves on and let's go!" Jessie snapped. James silently complied, pulling on the black gloves that he held in his lap and standing to meet her quickly. "Now come on! We'll be late!" she said and took off running into the woods. "Jessie I don't wanna run!" James whined, but followed anyway. "Shut your trap! Maybe if we're early the boss'll forgive us for a few things!" Jessie shot over her shoulder. James didn't have an argument for that one, so he ran as well.

They reached headquarters indeed, early, and they sauntered through the door to Giovanni's reception office quite pleased with themselves. "Team name, and appointment time," the receptionist inquired, not bothering to look up from filing her nails. "Rocket team 'Meowth' and we're scheduled for 10:30," Jessie announced casually. "Right," the girl said punching a few keys on her computer, "Jessie, James, and your Meowth. Right? We're running an hour early today you guys are late."

Both Rockets winced at this, exchanging nervous glances. Technically, they were on time, but according to the boss, his time was universal time, and even though they had no way of knowing they would be running early, in his mind they were late. "So will he-" "He'll see ya now," the girl answered Jessie's question before she had finished. "Come on James, it'll be alright," the red haired girl said taking his hand. He cringed, but followed her as she led the way through the immense double door and into the dreaded office.

James feared going in there after what had happened last time. Jessie had forced him to speak to Giovanni, and he ended up bearing the brunt of his aggressions, eventually ending with James staring down the barrel of a gun. He hadn't spoken to Jessie for the rest of the day, and things had been a bit rough between them since the incident, but James felt more secure now that Jessie held his hand in hers.

The room was silent as the two Rockets entered, and the Persian resting on an elaborate cushion at Giovanni's feet lifted its head to glare at them condescendingly. A low growl resounded from deep within its throat as it leapt into Giovanni's lap, and the only movement visible from the infamous leader of Team Rocket, was a single stroke down the creature's spine. "You, you wanted to see us sir?" Jessie croaked stepping forward. No answer came to her inquiry, and James



took a step farther behind his friend.

Jessie was more than willing to let him hide behind her, as she knew how much he feared their leader, but she was not satisfied with his silence. "Sir?" she ventured sheepishly. She heard him take a deep breath and clear his throat slightly, but was silent for several more minutes before finally speaking. "I did indeed wish to see you two today, because I have something very important to discuss with you," he said evenly.

Jessie and James drew in a collective gasp, because in Giovanni's terms, that meant something quite serious was at stake. "You two are the most unreliable, most incompetent, stupid, and idiotic agents I have ever had the misfortune of working with. I cannot believe I have people like you working for my organization, in particular James. Whatever I was thinking when I hired him was completely insane, and I was wrong in doing so. He is the worst of both of you, and I truly believe you, Jessie, could have gone far with us had it not been for him," he said finally turning around to face the terrified agents.

James' expression twisted in hurt and he was forced to look to the floor to hide his tears. Jessie put a hand reassuringly on his back, scowled as she witnessed his plight and stepped completely in front of him in his defense, remaining composed. "You hired him because he's my best friend, and I refuse to do anything without him," she answered calmly. "And I only hired you because you are the daughter of the best agent I've worked with. Unfortunately the gift died when your mother did, you're nothing like her. She was beautiful, talented, even-tempered, and completely charismatic. She was charming and could get her way with anyone and anything. I miss her sorely, and I wish she never had you, you weighted her down, and no less her actions on the mission that killed her were impaired because of thoughts of you," he spat cruelly.

Jessie looked away, tears at the mention of her mother whom she had loved deeply dying, and the accusation that she had indirectly killed her falling freely and causing even her heart to shatter. James took her tenderly into his arms, both of them glaring maliciously at the floor, wishing they could turn their gaze to Giovanni. "I've had it with you two, you are fired, and no that doesn't mean you don't get a paycheck every month any longer. You two will spend the rest of your lives in my personal prison, but not before you've had a sound lashing. Guards, take them away, no one leaves Team Rocket knowing as much as you do," Giovanni snapped his fingers as Jessie and James' jaws dropped in utter horror.

They felt themselves being pulled apart as they were seized by several of the guards in mock Roman attire and they both cried out in surprise. "Jessie!" James cried reaching out for her. His arm was immediately beaten back and he yelped in both pain and surprise. "Hey! Leave him alone!" Jessie yelled struggling forward. She managed to wrench herself free from the burly grip, but she didn't get far before she was struck with unnatural force in the back with the blunt end of a spear.

James reacted instantly as she hit the ground with a sickening thud, he himself tearing free and rushing to her side. "Grab them you idiots!" Giovanni screeched. "No!" James yelled as Jessie allowed herself to be reclaimed. "It's no use James," she whispered staring

into his eyes mournfully. He scowled and kicked the guard behind him firmly in the knees, scrambling to his feet. "Kill him if you have to just detain him!" Giovanni barked.

Jessie tensed as she heard the sound of the stout hunting knives she knew the guards carried being drawn, but didn't make a move to escape, knowing if she did cold steel would be turned upon her. James backed up fearfully, artfully dodging a clumsy lunge by one of the guards. He turned to face her and stopped for a moment, stunned. "James don't try to escape! They'll kill you!" she yelled to him. He shook his head to indicate he wouldn't give up his struggle and bolted for the door. He caught a small nick in the shoulder as he ran, a guard close at his heels, and several more waiting at the exit. "No!" Jessie screamed as a particularly large man caught up with James and her friend cried out in pain, dropping to the floor with a long slash mark torn through the back of his uniform, blood already seeping through it.

He rolled over, groaning, and opened his eyes just in time to ward off another blow with his gloved hand. The blade tore easily through both black fabric and flesh, and James was finally at the mercy of his tyrannical leader. He screamed in anguish as the attack did not abate, a dagger tearing through the soft flesh of his wrist and another piercing through the center of his hand. He squeezed his eyes shut harder as he felt someone kick him sharply in his side, turning back over onto his stomach. The last assault Giovanni allowed before calling for the guards to stop, was the searing pain of a dagger being driven into his back near his shoulder. He screamed as loud as his lungs would allow in sheer agony and Jessie mimicked him, knowing her friend would not survive long with his wounds.

James lay motionless on the floor, the hilt of the blade protruding grotesquely from his back, a small pool of blood forming beneath him. "James?" Jessie called. He remained motionless, trying as hard as he could to show her he was still alive, but his muscles wouldn't allow it. "No James? James please answer me," Jessie began to sob as no response came from the young man on the ground.

Giovanni smiled at his handiwork, snapping his fingers again to get the guards' attention. "Seventy lashes for her, and the special treatment for him," he said casually. The guards that held Jessie nodded and she didn't struggle as they led her down a guilefully hidden stairway to the darkness within.

She closed her eyes and kept them closed until she was thrown roughly onto her stomach and her hands and feet bound to unseen posts. "Well girlie, ya might me Miyamoto's daughter, but I'm really gonna enjoy this," she didn't recognize the voice of the entity above her. The only thing in her mind was the brutal beating of her best friend she had just witnessed. If he wasn't already dead, he would certainly die in the cell with her.

She sobbed and barely felt the first sting of the whip as it bit into the exposed flesh of her back. "James," she whispered mournfully. "Jessie," he whispered back, not even having heard her as he struggled to stay standing. He leaned harder on the guards that held him erect so he could witness the torture of Jessie. She screamed in pain as her back split open under the force of the leather whip, and James let the tears fall. "Why didn't we listen to Meowth?" he thought to himself as the cracking of the whip ceased and the only

sounds were the muffled sobs of Jessie. "Throw them in the same cell, I'll let them die together," James bristled at the sound of Giovanni's voice, but his consciousness soon failed him, and everything faded to black. Just for good measure, they whipped him a few times, even unconscious, and forced his grief stricken friend to watch.

Jessie allowed the guard to help her to the damp moldy prison cell at the farthest end of it. They had been assured the smallest, darkest, and generally the most miserable cell Giovanni knew of in his personal dungeon and as Jessie hit the floor roughly, the last sound she heard before blacking out was the final slam of the gate, a knoll of destiny, and her fate.

Jessie awoke what seemed like days later to her, and sat up with extreme difficulty, forgetting her torn and bloodied back. She opened her eyes to find mostly darkness, but a dim light from outside shone on the one thing she had feared seeing. James lay sprawled in an unnatural position on the floor of the cell. "No! James!" she cried hoarsely.

She crawled cautiously to his side, and her hands were instantly at her mouth at the sight of his mangled body. "James? Wake up," she whispered shaking him gently. He didn't stir. "James? Come on pal, please wake up," she begged shaking him harder. When he still remained lifeless, a sob escaped her throat as she began to cry. "Please don't be dead, you can't leave me! Not now, not now Oh god please no, you mean the world to me James. Please, please wake up," she whispered. He stirred, and Jessie smiled in relief as his eyes slowly managed to slide open. "J-Jess?" he croaked. "Oh god, James!" Jessie cried, tears of pure joy streaming down her cheeks.

He winced in pain, closing his eyes again as a low moan resounded in his throat. Only then did Jessie remember his slit wrist and the dagger that had to still be lodged in his back. She moved her hand to his shoulder to find cold metal and confirm her suspicions as she gripped the hilt nervously. "I'm going to pull it out James, and it's going to hurt like hell, so brace yourself," she said firmly. He nodded and braced himself for the inevitable pain.

Jessie gritted her teeth and began easing the dagger out slowly. James tensed as he felt it move slightly and the blood begin to flow down his shoulder. "Just hang on James, hang on," Jessie said evenly. The pain intensified as the dagger slid farther out of the young man's flesh, and James squeezed his eyes shut as hard as he possibly could, and set his jaw, determined not to scream. "Almost, doing great James, I'm almost there," Jessie promised stroking the back of his head reassuringly. She set her jaw as well as the blade cleared his back and a stream of blood ran down it to the floor, gathering in the miniscule puddle beneath particularly that shoulder.

Jessie smiled in victory and threw the knife with a vengeance to one corner of the cell, gathering James into her lap. He shook violently as she removed her black gloves and white Jacket, pressing them both against the wound in his back, with fear, cold, and pain. "Jessie, I-" "Shhh, you were very brave James, but save your strength, you'll need it for when we get out of here," she whispered brushing his hair away from his cold, wet forehead.

Jessie gasped as she recalled watching his wrist being slit, and

lifted the bloodied hand from the ground. James cried out sharply in pain and she hesitated, gripping the fingers of his black glove apprehensively. "I-I need to get this off, hold on again," she said somberly. James nodded and this time didn't suppress his piercing scream on agony as fabric grated against rendered flesh.

Another sob escaped Jessie's throat as she was instantly forced to press her thumb into the profusely bleeding wrist, and even James could not bear to look at it. "Oh god," she breathed and slipped her white Rocket's jacket out from underneath her friend. "Okay, James, I'm so sorry, but you're going to have to hold this while I get something to tie that up. It won't be much, but I'll do for now, just as soon as we get rescued," she said moving James' hand to his side where he could grip it with his other hand.

He begrudgingly obliged, pinching his wrist as hard as he could with his remaining strength. Jessie swallowed hard as she found the hem of the jacket, ripping a long strip from it in one swift movement. "Jessie, don't," James whispered weakly. Jessie stopped her motion suddenly, her jaw dropping as she looked down to her friend. "What? Why?" she asked in complete disbelief.

James drew in a labored breath, his body shuddering as he released it gently and lifted his mangled hand to Jessie's view. "Jessie, I-I don't think I'm going to make it, but you should try and save yourself, you'll get sick down here without your jacket. Don't lose your life on a hopeless cause," he said quietly, causing tears to spring to Jessie's eyes. "Well James, I have only one answer for you. I'd rather die down here by your side than live my life without you. You mean everything to me, you're the only reason I have to go on, now give me your hand!" she said angrily.

James let his tears fall as his friend snatched his hand from his grip, tying a makeshift tourniquet unbearably tightly about his slit wrist. "You'd die for me?" he asked meekly. Jessie stopped regarding her friend firmly and laid a hand tenderly on his cheek. "I would kill myself in the most painful way possible if it meant you'd be alright," she assured him and went back to work.

It was then James realized that what he had tried to avoid for so long, the thing he had feared most about his relationship with Jessie was true, and he could no longer deny it. His intense feelings of love for her were indefinitely confirmed and it pained him to think he was dying and would never be able to tell her. He found himself quite unable to reveal his feelings then and decided against it, knowing that if he did so, it would only hurt the person he cared most about in the world.

Jessie finished the bandage in silence and rested his hand on his chest gingerly. "There, done," she whispered hoarsely. James struggled to press himself as close to her as he possibly could, tears falling unabashed to the blood stained and damp floor. "Jessie?" he ventured. "Hm?" she replied stroking his cheekbone in comfort. "I'm scared," he whispered, "I can't hold on I'm so tired." Jessie gritted her teeth in determination and shook James back awake as she witnessed his eyelids drop with fatigue. "James you have to stay awake, and don't be afraid, we'll get out of here, and we'll get away from team Rocket. We'll run away just you and me, and Meowth too, and we'll be happy again! I promise you," she assured him, smiling gently. James let the tears fall as he looked into the

reassuring eyes of his best friend. "I can feel myself slipping. My body's giving up Jess! " he sobbed as his breathing grew ever more shallow. He coughed slightly at the exertion and a small bead of blood trickled down his cheek, drawing a collective gasp of horror from both Rockets. "Oh god, oh please no, I don't want to die. Please don't let me die!" James wailed weakly.

Jessie began to cry alongside of him, holding his trembling body closer to her. "You're not dying James, you'll be fine, we'll be rescued and we can get you to a hospital and-" James interrupted her with a finger on her lips. "Who's going to rescue us? The police? We're Team Rocket, we deserve it in their minds. Meowth alone? We're doomed, we're both going to die," he whispered mournfully. Jessie snarled under her breath and leaned over, staring intently into James' eyes. "James look at me, and repeat, 'I am not going to die'," she hissed sternly. "Say goodbye Jessie, for me? Please?" he begged softly. "Say it!" she repeated, her world spinning into a blur.

This was an all too familiar situation, and in her dream about Aradain, she had told the same story. James muttered something, but she didn't hear it as her ears hummed with a deafening torrent of blood against them. White enveloped her vision, and a voice rang out clearly in her mind. "We can make it through this, I know we can, as soon as we both snap out of it, we'll find a way out," Jessie recognized her words. "And we'll do it together." She wailed hearing James' determined response.

An image came to mind, of herself and her friend walking casually in a forest, light conversation the only action, it faded quickly and was replaced by a split second of an ebony-haired little boy. He leapt forward landing in a winged James' arms, both laughing joyously. It had been real, and as she remembered Jasper, and her own 'death' clearly she knew it for sure and opened her now blazing purple eyes. "Shadow! Let me out of here!" she screamed, her throat protesting painfully, not noticing James struggle for breath in her lap. "Jessie I-I Ugh," she heard him croak and his body went limp in her arms. She shrieked at this, reacting instantly and laid him gingerly on the floor, cupping his face in her hands. "James? No, no, don't. Don't you dare! Don't you dare die on me! James!" she hissed bitterly.

He remained lifeless, and Jessie ran her hand along his cheek and through his hair one last time, a meek sob escaping her throat and her vision blurred with tears. "Damn you Shadow! Damn you to hell!" she wailed falling with her sobs onto James' lifeless body. She cried bitterly, the extreme loss bearing away at her psyche with undeterred force. "Take me if you have to, but please let James go!" she cried, gripping the soft fabric of his blood stained uniform in sorrow. She waited for any sign of the entity, but when she heard nothing, a final scream of agony resounded from her throat, echoing against the bare stone walls of the dungeon.

Shadow chortled happily to herself as she watched Jessie scream in anguish over her best friend's body, smiling and turning to the young man next to her. His thin, bony features were illuminated grotesquely by the dim purple light of a crystal, which Jessie was visible through. It rested on the highest point on the arched back of a sinewy cat and it flickered as the young man put a hand condescendingly atop it.

"Well Rill, like how I threw in killing her friend off? I think she'll be a lot weaker now," she mused. Rill smiled wickedly and laughed as well. "You did a perfect job of distorting that memory, too bad he's still alive, he'll be sure to come for her," he warned. Shadow laughed spitefully, nearly falling over with its sudden intensity at the ridiculous comment. "That weakling? He'll never beat me before I've broken her spirit and I can use her power to take over this world, and many others! That Vinetra is a fool and too stupid to realize her own powers, and once I can use Jessie's powers of the mind to my advantage there will be no stopping me!" the cat cackled.

Rill shuddered as the venomous laughter filled the small recess of a cave where Shadow had taken up residence and looked to Jessie. She still lay bolted firmly to the ceremonially decorated stone slab, sweat pouring down her forehead as she struggled with the terrible world she had been sent to. His lips coiled cruelly and he turned back to Shadow, joining in her laughter. "Resistance is futile," he mused severely. Shadow calmed her raucous laughter and pawed the charm emblazoned with the symbol of the mind at her broad chest grinning in pure relish and delight. "And this is only the beginning of my plan."

## 7. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 7: Reflection in a Broken Mirror

### Chapter 7: Reflection in a Broken Mirror

"So Misty, lost one of your pals huh?" Nightwing asked as she carefully checked the bandage around his wrist. She glared at him, ice lacing her ocean blue eyes as they filled with tears. "Yeah, J-Jessie was killed," she whispered with difficulty. "Close were you?" the young man continued. Misty reflected on the 'sleepovers' they had spent together in her room, gossiping about various topics ranging from Ash, Brock and James, to their Pokemon they had kept and smiled vaguely as the tears ran harder. Jessie had been like her best girl friend she was never able to have travelling with Ash, as she had never really kept friends before that and had only been with boys.

Jessie had even openly admitted James and Meowth had been her only friends before they had all ended up in Aradain, and they were both glad for feminine company. Misty had grown very attached to the impulsive and garrulous young woman, and missed her sorely.

"Very," Misty answered truthfully after a long silence. "I'm sorry." She looked in wonder at the seemingly genuine concern from the young man whom lay stricken in the bed before her and raised an eyebrow. "Why were you in the alliance army anyway?" Misty asked brushing a strand of ebony hair away from Nightwing's face gingerly with a single claw. He smiled warmly at her and reached up to touch her cheek affectionately. "Money, that's it. I never wanted to ally with that witch VinetraDid you know you're beautiful?" he asked quietly. Misty blushed and smiled back sheepishly. "You're not so bad yourself," she said as she leaned down closer to him. "For a former alliance assassin?" he asked closing his eyes. "For anyone," she replied but as she could feel his lips on hers, she was startled by

the door being flung wide open.

Ash was immediately visible in the doorway, breathing heavily as he leaned against the frame, motioning for Misty to come with him. "I'll be back," she whispered tenderly to Nightwing and moved to join Ash, "what's the problem?" He drew in a deep breath and regained composure, motioning down the hall. "I-It's James, he's gone totally crazy now, he-he won't l-listen to us, he, he's leaving, and II think he said something about finding Jessie," he panted.

Misty's eyes widened in terror as she bolted from the door, but turned as she realized Ash hadn't followed her and was still standing in the doorway palpitating heavily. "Come on Ash! We've gotta stop him now!" she yelled. "Well you didn't run down here," he muttered and proceeded down the hallway to find James still engrossed in packing for his trek as he had left him.

"James, this is insanity and I won't allow it! Stop right where you are!" Misty yelled pointing an accusing webbed finger at him. He shoved the scroll of the mind into the pack he was preparing and ignored her, standing up while searching for something with merely his eyes. "I agree, yer just diggin' yerself in deepa. I miss Jess too, but I ain't about to go kill myself ova her! Dat dream was nuthin!" Meowth scowled. "I don't care, I know what I saw and it's not nothing," James muttered offhandedly. "James, you're in mourning, and denial, Jessie died. She's gone and there's nothing you can do about it, please listen to reason," Ash pleaded.

James didn't stop, and simply glared daggers at his friends, still silently packing. "James don't go alone! I'm coming with you!" Jasper piped from his formerly silent vigil on the floor next to James' bed. The youth finally stopped his fury at the small plea, kneeling by the boy lovingly. "I can't take you Jasper, it's too dangerous," he said placing both hands on his small shoulders. "But what about you? And what'll I do?" Jasper asked fearfully. "If I come back, I'll have Jessie, if not, then I'll be with her so I'll be happy either way, and what you can do, is let Ash and Misty, Brock and Meowth and Pikachu take care of you," he said motioning to his two present friends.

They both stifled a mutual sob and held onto each other, knowing they were near losing another friend, at least to his own insanity. "James please don't go," Misty choked weakly, "they'll still be after you, there's alliance soldiers around for sure!" James stood as she began to cry, taking her into his arms lovingly. "I'll be okay Misty, I have to go, at least for me. If Jessie really is dead, then this will at least help me feel like I didn't fail her. Please don't cry," he whispered into her neck as he stroked her flame colored hair affectionately.

She sobbed bitterly and clutched the young man to her tightly, almost as if she never wanted to let go. "I have six best friends James, one of them is dead, and I don't want to lose another!" This caused Ash to burst into tears along with both of them, throwing his arms about his friends protectively. "I'm sorry, this is my fault I'm so sorry!"

Ash, as well as everyone who had been given the gifts of the messengers, felt so impeccably close through their hardships and through the development of their powers, that it was if they had

known each other for much longer than they actually had. They confided in one another as openly as they had in their own small groups as they had become inseparably close. Jessie's death had opened an immense void in the group's tight relationship, and no one could let her go. Especially not James.

The cerulean-haired young man finally released his younger companions, wiping the tears from both their cheeks with his thumb tenderly. "I'm coming back, and if Jessie is alive, god help me if I come back alive and without her," he said firmly. Ash and Misty smiled vaguely at him, finally accepting that they could no longer help the grief stricken soul, and dried their own tears. "Well, if you're going to go, take this with you," Misty said removing the shell necklace she had bought the first day they had arrived in Vertigo. "I always thought of this as a good luck charm, lets hope it favors you," she added pressing it lovingly into his palm.

He took it gratefully, tying it about his neck and shoving the shell into the front of his shirt to protect it. "I know it will," he promised her. Misty managed a smile and motioned to his shoulder. "Want me to clean that up for you a bit more before you go?" she asked. James smiled wryly as he moved the collar of his shirt to expose his newly healed shoulder. "I don't know how it happened, but it has to be a sign, and besides, the last couple of time you've taken care of me have not been pleasant," he mused fondly.

Misty chuckled slightly as she remembered the time he and Jessie had been injured by their own Pokemon and she had tended to his arm, and recently when he'd been attacked, and both times she had been anything but nice about it. "Well, best get going before the sky's too black to fly," Ash said cutting the silence. James' face fell as he looked outside to the gray morning sky and the choking mist concealing most of the main courtyard. "I can't fly, there's bound to be alliance soldiers anywhere in the forest, and I can't risk getting shot in the air. I don't want injuries from falling as well," he said with a heavy sigh. The duo understood his reasoning well and when James had finished packing, escorted him to the palace gates.

The sun filtered weakly through the gray skies as James heard the gate slam shut with an indifferently loud thud. He turned on his heels with a sigh, hope for the first time glittering behind the still sorrowful emerald eyes. "James please let me go!" Jasper pleaded one last time. James knelt and reached through the thick metal bars to caress the little boy's cheek affectionately. "I don't want you hurt too, stay here, and I promise I'll be back," he said and stood.

He merely smiled at Ash, Misty, and Meowth, tacit goodbyes passing between them fulfilling any need for verbal affection. He sighed and turned, finally understanding what the scrolls had meant and what his mission was.

—

"Mind, Body, Heart and soul asunder,  
all will come to death in thunder.  
By light of noon, or dead of night,



fate decides, to love or smite.

Remorse and guilt, the poisons that kill

to let them claim you, is to surrender your will.

Though sorrow reigns, with its despairing kin

the answer my friend, lies in the wind.

The myth, it beckons you, and calls out your name,

you must answer the call, or all is in vain.

Reach out to yourself like never you did

you alone can rescue a soul from the shadows which it slid."

—

It was all true, his heart, his mind, his body, and even his soul had been divided and forgotten with Jessie's death, and he knew he must answer her call, or all was lost. He remembered when Misty had first put Ichtsique on the altar in the sacred room, he had mentioned something about bewareing the darkness, and his poem mentioned a soul sliding into it.

It had to mean Jessie, there was no other explanation for it, and he had accepted the call of her soul to be rescued. "I won't fail you this time Jess, we'll be together, and when I get you back, I swear I'll tell you how I really feel," he promised himself as he wrapped his cloak tighter over his wings and took his first step along the dirt path leading away from Vertigo.

"Ash, he's not going to make it alone," Jasper said meekly tugging at his flaming tail. Ash sighed deeply and crossed his arms across his chest, glancing down at the child. His lips curled from their former frown as inspiration struck and he knelt by Jasper's side. "I do believe I have a solution for that."

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James sighed as he watched the blood red sun finally sink below the horizon, leaving the landscape a lonely blue with twilight that shadows melted into to sleep for the night, and stopped in his tracks. He wouldn't be able to travel any further that day, and would have to find a place to set up a temporary camp. He didn't dare fly, as alliance mercenaries were bound to be patrolling the area and he knew that their policy was shoot first, ask questions later if the victim happened to live.

James took a small beaten route into the wooded areas flanking the established trade path he had walked that day, searching for any sign of an escarpment or someplace to get his bearings. "Shadowrun, Riley read that it was somewhere in the mountains, so maybe Jasper's old town, if anyone's still there, has some information," he whispered to himself.

His hard, determined expression softened to happiness as a small hill came into view and he jogged briskly with a new joy in his heart. He

reached the crest of it easily, and his grin widened as the tall spires of the mountains that the ravaged town lay in. "Just keep holding on Jess, I'm coming for you," he whispered as a triumphant wind whistled past his ear. He smiled and spread his wings, letting the winds play along them as well. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, you were right after all. And you told me once to tell Jessie how I feel, and so you'll be right again." The winds caressed his cheek tenderly, accepting his apology, and he smiled as they were once again kind, the clouds above parting slightly to reveal the diamond stars against a blue velvet sky. "You're the wind beneath my wings, I'll always love you Jessica, with all of my heart and soul," he whispered wistfully. "Who're ya talkin' to?" James jumped in terror and whirled around at the small voice at his feet.

The innocent stare back from Jasper sent him crashing to the floor in exasperation. "Damn it! Do not scare me like that!" James gasped clutching at his chest. The little boy smiled warmly, despite James' angry response to him, and was instantly at his side, his arms wrapped around his neck affectionately. James sighed in defeat and hugged Jasper back, smiling slightly himself. "Jasper! Good to see you buddy! What are you doing here? How'd you find me?" he rattled, genuinely glad his young friend had found him.

Jasper pulled away and smiled wickedly. "I told you not to go alone! And I meant it!" he replied. James laughed as he stood, bringing the boy with him and brushing the dirt off of him, and his own wings and tail. "Well, I can't afford to waste time taking you back, so you might as well come with!" he said warmly. James never had a shred of an intention to take his friend back to Vertigo, but he let the child believe he had beguiled him into accompanying him on his quest.

Jasper squealed in delight, clinging to James' hand, and a wave of paternal feelings flooded the winged young man's heart. \_"When I have kids someday, I'll cherish them. Probably spoil them rotten, but who cares? They'll be the love of my life, and Jessie too, and maybe they'll even be our kids,"\_ he thought to himself, \_"or maybe we can adopt Jasper." \_He scooped the child up into his arms laughing warmly, grateful for something to find comfort in while Jessie was gone from his life.

James reflected on this as he located a small cave for them to share and placed both his things and the child in it. "I'll be back, I'll get us some firewood, won't be gone long," he promised him. Jasper nodded obediently, and James kissed him quickly on the forehead before slipping inconspicuously from the mouth of the cave, but he sighed as he strolled nonchalantly near the shelter he had found for the night.

Jasper had been his only ray of hope in what seemed like an eternal void of darkness, and he had been the only comfort since Jessie had been gone from his life. He couldn't explain it, but having him seemed to help James to miss his friend less, and ease the pain. Jasper was the only reason he had the will to search for Jessie, and the only reason he hadn't killed himself. He sighed wistfully, wanting to see Jessie once more and hefted the small bundle of dry timber he had collected to make his way back to the cave.

Jasper leapt from his spot on the ground the instant James was visible, babbling excitedly at some accomplishment. James set the

wood down and smiled at the unfurled sleeping roll he had packed, several pots and pans awaited his attention for dinner, and the food he had packed lay neatly by a ring of stones set up for a fire pit. "You did this?" he asked, pleased.

Jasper grinned with relish, snatching some of the wood and began arranging it in his makeshift ring. "Well, I'm hungry, and I didn't want to wait for you to do it!" he explained. James laughed heartily and joined his friend on the ground helping to arrange them correctly. "No, you've got to make kind of a cone like this," he instructed, finishing with a few bits of dry grass for kindling. Jasper raised an eyebrow quizzically as James ushered him away and moved for the flint stones in his pack.

"How'd you know that?" he asked. James looked furtively back at him, and ignored the question while he attempted to ignite the wood with the sparks. "Man do I ever miss Ash right now," he joked nervously, attempting to change the subject. Jasper inched closer to him, his brow furrowed with worry. "Answer my question," he said, "because if something's wrong- Oh wait, is it about Jessie?" James stopped a stroke with the flint halfway and bit his lip to ward off tears. "K-Kind of," he admitted, as he had learned it with her while being trained for Team Rocket field agents.

Jasper was silent as crimson flames were born onto the wood, beginning to tear at their meal voraciously, and James sighed deeply, cradling his forehead in his hands mournfully. "Jasper, listen, first of all, I'm not trying to be mean when I say this, but could you please, not mention Jessie for a while?" he asked, throat tight with threatening tears. The boy sidled up closer to his friend in an attempt to comfort him and softened his gaze as a few wet patches made themselves known in the dirt beneath James.

"I'm sorry. It hurts a lot doesn't it?" he asked stroking his wings affectionately. "It almost literally hurts me physically I miss her so much," he whispered, the pain boring with a new tenacity at the back of his mind. "What is it that you miss?" Jasper asked easing himself into James' lap. He smiled slightly, wiping the tears from his cheeks and sighed deeply. "Probably everything about her, her determination, her sarcastic attitude, her lust for life and even the way" he paused, his tone and attitude changing and fresh tears landing next to the initial ones in the dirt, "and even the way she said my name, the way she always had to have her hair perfect, like she was dressing up for some grand party where anybody who's anybody goes to. How much she loved working on her powers, how she just knew we'd come out on top someday. Even her beauty, her eyes, her smile, even the way she carried herself, always with an air of grace and charm about her. The way she used to talk about the future, she always said us' and we', she always included me, even the way she would be delighted at any plan I made up. It wasn't always so obvious how close we were, but I always loved how we never had to tell each other how much we meant. The words "You're my best friend" rarely ever left my lips, and I don't think she ever said it to me, but we didn't have to," James explained, his voice wavering with the inevitable tears. "And even the way she used to beat me into sense, and-and even when she wouldn't let me go, ever, not to my parents, not to enemies, Team Rocket, and even death."

Jasper smiled, his eyes shimmering with hope that he and James would be able to find the one woman they both knew he was destined to be

with. "You really love her don't you?" he asked getting carried away. James could no longer control his sobs at that, burying his face into his hands in utter sorrow, sobbing bitterly. "Every minute she's gone it's like a needle through my heart! She was my other half, she always made up for what I lack, she had strength for my weakness, determination for my cowardice! Hell! Even our names are part of a whole!" he sobbed, "and I couldn't even tell her how I felt. I'm still a coward."

Jasper looked away at the sudden outburst, understanding everything James had said about Jessie, and closed his eyes as he realized that he had caused it. "Oh no, James, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean-" "No, no Jasper, it's not your fault that" he cut him off, and was unable to finish his sentence. "I won't talk about it anymore," the boy assured him. James wiped the tears furiously from his cheeks, his gaze set hard on a conglomerate crack in the stone walls of his refuge, and remained silent.

Jessie and James had indeed been two halves of the same, mutually broken soul. Ever since childhood they had both felt the sting of want, James of love, Jessie of rectitude from life, and they had found it in each other. James had loved Jessie's spontaneity, and her ability to pull him through anything and everything, and he treasured the genuine friendship and sisterly love she showed him, which he had lacked from his own parents as a child. Her strength was her asset, and what she lacked in tenderness, James had brought it out in her. He had always been sensitive, and had calmed more than an intense rage or two with a soothing word. This was merely because she had been hurt deeply at a young age, fate betraying her by taking her mother, but James always liked to think that he somewhat filled the void in her heart that Miyamoto had left. She indefinitely confided in him and James refused to break the promise they had made to each other so many times in the past, and that hadn't been marred until the fateful day Jessie was taken from him. A promise to stay together forever, no matter what the circumstances, and to always remain the one beautiful whole they both knew on merely a subconscious level.

James sighed as his sobs abated and brushed his hair back to keep it out of his eyes and turned to Jasper, who had a look of sheer terror and remorse at breaking his heart. "It's alright Jasper, you didn't mean to make me cry," he whispered brokenly. "II know, but I did. I thought talking about it might help," he said on the verge of tears himself. "Your heart was in the right place," James promised him.

The young man knew it was paining him to keep his feelings inside, but he was afraid. Terrified to know that he was weak, and that he couldn't help Jessie, if she was even alive. He had failed to save her life in return for her heroic acts to save his during their trials at Team Rocket, and he blamed himself for her death, knowing that if he had been brave enough to kill Rill when he had the chance, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to murder Jessie.

He could still feel her blood pouring over his fingers in an obviously vain attempt to keep her alive, still hear her dimming voice, see her dying eyes, and her last words echoed for what seemed like the millionth time that night for James. \_"I'll always be with you James, and I'll always be your best friend." \_"Oh Jessie, I wish none of this had ever happened to us," he moaned, beginning to cry

again, "why do I have to love you so much?"

He rocked himself gently in front of the now blazing fire, tears drying on the hot stone of the ground near it quickly as they fell. Jasper wrapped his arms about his neck and rested his head against his chest affectionately. "We'll get her back James, you're meant to be happy, and meant to be with her," he whispered sternly. "I hope you're right," he replied softly. "I know I am, because only whole souls can live in the afterlife," Jasper said. James raised an eyebrow, unsure of what he meant and backed away from the intense heat of the flames, unnecessary for his already burning cheeks. "What do you mean?" he asked with difficulty. "If Jessie is part of you, then her soul can't go anywhere without its other half. You both have to die at the same moment, because you'll never be apart, and your souls have to be together, even in death."

James sobbed harder hearing the small anecdote of wisdom from the boy, holding him closely as he began to cry alongside his grief stricken friend. He realized that Jasper was right, and though he could barely hear the name Jessie without beginning to cry, he needed to be strong for her. It was what she had done for him so many times, and it was what he knew he needed to do. "We'll get her back Jasper, and I'll tell her how I feel. I'll come right up to her, take her hands into mine and look into her eyes and say Jessie I've loved you all my life, you complete my soul, marry me' and we'll all live happily ever after," he said mimicking his spoken acts with Jasper in Jessie's place.

Jasper brightened as James did, ecstatic to finally hear some words of optimism from his mouth. "Just promise me I can go to your wedding," he said with a smirk. James laughed as he released him and nodded the affirmative, moving to his supplies. "I guess we need to eat huh?" he asked drying the last of his tears from his cheeks and eyes. "Yeah, I'll help," the boy replied as he handed him the rack to hang the miniscule pot over the fire.

James attempted to keep a cheerful attitude while he ate with Jasper, but his mind kept wandering back to their previous conversation. \_"Jess, if you're truly with me always, please give me the strength to go on,"\_ he thought to himself, wishing that she could be there in person to reassure him, \_"I can't do this alone." \_He sighed deeply at his own thoughts later that night as he lay on his back, watching as the fire dwindled, and Jasper's rhythmic breathing of sleep lulling him.

He couldn't help but feel the little boy was a godsend, as he had always been with him when the pain of Jessie's death had threatened to kill him, and there was definitely something strange about the child. He always seemed to know exactly what to say, and it was never what a boy of his age would say about love and wisdom. It was as if something, some transcendental force, had created him to replace Jessie while he searched for her, to give him strength. "No," he whispered aloud, suddenly comprehending he was horribly wrong, "to make me realize the strength I've had all along."

James smiled broadly and closed his eyes, knowing that nothing was impossible, especially in the world of Aradain, where everything was of suspicion, and nothing was tangible. For all he knew, it could all be some wild dream derived from underdone food, or he could even be dead. Perhaps he had died in Jessie's arms in the Team Rocket prison,

but James smiled as he reminded himself that he knew that it was real.

He felt too strongly his blazing, undying love for Jessie, and the gnawing suspicion he had in the back of his mind ever since he had first placed her sword in the ground that she was alive. All of his friends, the seven messengers, knew deep in their hearts it was very real, and their old world had been the false one. They all shared the same desire to liberate the place they belonged in, and the feeling of duty doubtlessly passed down from their ancestors who had freed Aradain centuries before them. James vowed that he would fulfill his part of the legend, and he would never give up hope as he drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

The duo didn't take the time to have breakfast the following morning, as James had a new tenacity and hope burning in his heart, glimmering with a fresh valiancy behind his renewed and exuberant emerald irises. He looked upward as they trudged through the forest, the same eyes directed for any sign of the town. It took about a days walking to get there, and he had started late the previous day, leaving time for inquiries and exploration once in town.

"Think they'll remember me back home?" Jasper asked as James helped him down from a small outcropping of rock. "Of course they will! You haven't been gone that long," he assured him as they started along the dirt path again. James felt a pang of remorse at taking Jasper back to hometown where his parents had been killed not long ago, and he'd witnessed a brutal slaughter and raised an eyebrow at his wide grin. "You sure you don't mind going home?" he asked warily. Jasper chuckled and shook his head. "Not at all! Why should I?" he replied. James winced at his severe denial, but shrugged it off, knowing it was a part of grief, even once believing himself Jessie wasn't dead, even if it was for a brief moment.

"Do you know of anyone we could talk to there?" he asked after an unnerving silence. "My grandma! She knows all the legends and stories! My grandpa was the town elder before he died!" he said excitedly and James winced again at the news of another death in the poor boy's family. "Great! I bet she could help us," he said with determination in his voice. "I know she can."

James smiled, completely awestruck at the child's wisdom far beyond his years and placed a hand on his shoulder. He spread his wings slightly to stretch them as he knew he would need to fly soon and he had barely flown since the day Jessie had been killed. They were out of shape, but with Jasper's help he had finally managed to get them clean, and he had once again begun to look like the person he once was. He ruffled his feathers slightly to ward off the chill of the mountain morning and both he and Jasper drew in a collective gasp of awe as the spires of the tallest buildings of his old town were visible at the end of the path where the section of forest dividing it from Vertigo ended.

They took off running and soon found themselves at the still broken gates of the city, and James read the name of it, having neglected to before. It read, \_"Welcome to Shadow River." \_He grinned broadly kneeling to look Jasper in the eyes. "Do you know what this means?" he asked excitedly. The boy drew back apprehensively, shaking his head in terror. "Shadowrun! Which, with the words separated means exactly what I want it to! Hold on Jess! Just a little bit longer I

promise you!" he stopped to laugh, "Jasper we're almost there!"

He took the boy's hands in his own, twirling him around in a wide arc as he began to laugh as well, a few feathers blowing loose from his outstretched wings. "James you're crazy! What does my town have to do with anything?" he asked with a smirk. James grinned crookedly as he stood again, lowering his eyes seductively at the gates of Shadow River. "Run, is another word for River."

## 8. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 8: The Dark Rill

### Chapter 8: The Dark Rill

The town still lay in ruins from the carnage that had taken place recently, and though there were a few people scattered about the town, rebuilding shattered lives, burying loved ones, and attempting to restore order to the general chaos, the silence so thick James could clearly hear the wind whistle through his feathers and rustle his black cloak. "It's a ghost town," Jasper remarked mournfully. James nodded silently and took Jasper's hand. "Let's find your grandma huh?" he said quietly.

The gravel crunched under two sets of boots as the main path leading to the center of the town, the only sound that dared break the silence. The wind howled softly and mournfully through unseen ruins, the burning stares of the remaining citizens turned upon the winged stranger walking with one of their own. "I know all these people, what are they looking at?" he muttered uneasily. "Me, don't worry about it. Not every day you see a guy with huge blue wings and a tail you know," James mused.

Jasper relaxed hearing his friend's easy tone, and pointed to a small cottage down the road they traveled. "There! Grandma's house! And there's smoke coming from it! I knew I could count on her to stay!" he cried sprinting forward. James watched him go, crossing both arms over his chest with a smile, enjoying the delight he took in visiting a family member. He never spoke of his parents, and the few times he had he spoke with a belittling attitude of them.

His expression shifted however, when he heard a few young men step from behind the charred ruins of a once grand church and stare at him. They were very secretive, and James was more than slightly irked that they would speak about him in such obvious tones behind his back. "Do you see that?" "Of course I do! I'm not blind! Man, the guests here get freakier every time!" "Think he can really fly with those?" "Why else would he have them retard?" James smirked at the small dispute that had arisen and spread his wings, lofting into the sky deftly as to prove that yes, his spectacular appendages did indeed function.

A collective gasp rose from the youths, and James couldn't help but chuckle at their terrified shrieks as he turned a deft flip midair, dropping dramatically from the sky to land next to Jasper at the doorstep of an ancient house. He pulled his wings back into his sides, sighing in relief and adjusting them appropriately before casting an arrogant grin down to the boy. "Was that fun James?" he asked sarcastically. "Actually it was, and it felt really good too, I

haven't flown in a long time," he answered smugly.

Jasper stifled a laugh and raised his fist to the door, hesitating only briefly before rapping twice in quick succession. No answer came to his signal, and he swallowed hard as the silence deepened, the wind still whistling, forsaken, through trees, and the burnt frames of houses that once stood proud. The doorknob creaked as it suddenly began to turn slowly in the door startling both whom stood waiting for it, and James looked up as it was opened a mere eye's width. The side of an ancient wrinkled face appeared in the crack, scouring the odd looking young man who stood at her doorstep, failing to notice Jasper at his feet. "What do you want?" she asked in a throaty feminine voice. Jasper sighed in exasperation and raised his arm to draw her attention. "It's me Grandma! Jasper!" he cried from below her.

Her expression softened after glaring harshly at James and she flung the door open and knelt, gathering the boy into her arms. "Oh Jasper! After your parents were killed, I thought they'd gotten you too!" she exclaimed. He hugged her back, and they remained silent for just a few precious moments before they both stood, and the woman ushered him inside. James made a move to follow, but was stopped by the old harridan, the harsh glare again distorting her ancient features. "You carry a sword youth, did you come to gloat over your victory? Alliance bastard!" she yelled motioning to the blade of the wind at his side and pointing an accusing finger at him.

Shocked, James put his hands up and took a step backward. "Oh no, Ma'am, I'm with the resistance! I even saved Jasper!" he said defensively. "Grandma it's okay! He's telling the truth! James is with the resistance! I came back to help him!" Jasper cried, seeing the verbal assault to his friend and rushing to the door. James smiled at him gratefully as he tugged his grandmother away from the door, and she reluctantly let him in.

Jasper wrapped his arms about his waist and James knelt to hug him back. "Please help him Grandma, he's my best friend in the whole wide world and he really needs it!" Jasper begged. The woman sighed as she realized how tightly her Grandson was holding on to this strange man, and understood the hurt in both pairs of emerald green eyes, noticing something else. The young man, James as Jasper had called him, had a tuft of blue feathers protruding from beneath his black cloak.

She gasped in wonder and threw the heavy black fabric to the side, revealing the pair of gossamer blue wings and tail. "Oh, I-" he sputtered, his cheeks coloring with embarrassment. "You! You're the messenger of the wind!" she exclaimed as James stood, covering his wings again. He blinked in rapid succession, not quite believing his ears and regarded the old woman discerningly. "Yes," he answered simply, completely speechless that she had known instantly who he was.

The old woman grew more excited at this, beckoning him eagerly to come with her to the living room. "Come on James!" Jasper piped enthusiastically and the messenger followed both his friend and the old woman into the small room situated in the center of the house.

It was decorated with an assortment of artifacts lining worn and deeply reddened shelves ranging from elaborately dyed silks, to



hand-painted paper lanterns. Several old and yellowed scrolls and books also lined one shelf in particular next to the singular glass paned window which was the only source of light in the room. James looked in wonder, suddenly reminded of Mr. Lao's shop where his entire adventure had begun, but his attention was focused, unmitigated and undivided, when his emerald eyes found a languid crystal ball that stood on a small makeshift pedestal on the floor, surrounded by a colorful assortment of exotic looking pillows. The woman suddenly appeared from the corner of his vision, moving to the oldest bookcase and searching through them with a gnarled and withered hand. She was an odd woman, and James couldn't help but frown in critical inspection of her tangled and nearly white hair that hung down to her waist and black robes. She took the most ragged book from her shelf with a groan of aching bones and seated herself on an elaborate crimson pillow lined with gold, opening the cover slowly and cautiously.

Jasper squealed in delight and took the seat next to her as James stood apprehensively next to the crystal. It flickered as he approached it, and he reached his hand out furtively. "Don't touch that," he jumped at the abrasive voice of the old woman. "Sorry Missus" he trailed off, unsure of how to address her. "Just call me Rose, and it's Miss now, I'm a widow," she answered practically, closing the book and setting it next to her on the floor. James sat heavily, his gaze never leaving the crystal and sighed. "I'm sorry," he said genuinely. "That's alright lad, now, what was your name again? And for the power's sake sit over here closer to us!" Rose called merrily.

James smiled vaguely and stood up, taking a pillow next to Jasper. "James, my name is James," he said never taking his eyes from the still flickering orb a mere feet in front of him. "So, James, I take it you want something from me," Rose began looking to him for an explanation. Jasper's breath caught in his chest as he realized his friend was going to have to mention Jessie's death again, and he cried every time he had done so thus far. "Want me to? If you're gonna cry again-" he warned putting a decisive finger up in front of his nose. James smiled warmly, placed his hand back in his lap and patted him affectionately on the shoulder. "I can do it, don't worry so much about me! You know it's me that should be worrying about you and I really think that" he said, but trailed off and swallowed hard as Rose urged him to stop avoiding the subject and begin his story, "right, where to start? Well, like Jasper said, I'm affiliated with the alliance, and tensions have been growing lately and my friend and I we-" Rose cut him off, "I don't want stories of the war! I know what's going on. You're here for personal reasons," she said.

James sighed as her emerald eyes, the same color as both he and Jasper possessed looked not at, but through him, straining the truth from them vivaciously. "I-I lost, someone," he began with difficulty and Jasper sighed as he heard the beginnings of the inevitable tears, "my best friend in the world, Jessie." Rose nodded knowingly. "This Jessie meant a lot to you did she?" she asked. "She has been my best friend for longer than I want to remember, she meant everything to me! She meant more than life itself and- and," he was unable to finish, but Rose urged him on with a friendly gesture of her hand. "Continue lad!" she encouraged. "I loved her more than anything else in the world as well," James finally admitted, looking to the ground to hide his tears from Jasper.

Rose raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "Why are you coming to me for council over her death?" she asked. Jasper rolled his eyes, letting James cry some more and answered for him. "She's not dead Grandma, and we think it has something to do with the myth of Shadowrun!" he said. James began to cry harder at the mention of his deceased friend again, and Jasper slapped himself in the forehead lightly, cursing under his breath.

Rose raised an eyebrow as the little boy was instantly at the sobbing James' side, and stood slowly, a feeling of nostalgia passing over her. She turned, her eyes scrutinizing the shelf behind her for one book in particular bound in grayed green leather. She located it, and eased it gently from its spot amidst the younger relatives and resumed her vigil next to Jasper. She looked to James and tapped Jasper on the back, running a hand through his ebony hair lovingly. "Draw the curtains dear, make it as dark as possible," she instructed and Jasper nodded as he stood swiftly.

James regained his composure, wiping the tears from his cheeks furiously and Rose ran a hand from his head down to the tips of his wings reassuringly. "There, there lad, dry your tears, I do believe I can help you," she said warmly. James sniffed back his tears and cleared his throat. "You have to help me get my Jess back, I'm nothing without her!" he groaned. Rose set a hand reassuringly on his shoulder and smiled deviously. "I'll do my best," she promised, "now, sit down, and I'll begin." "For once, I'm not going to be weak, and I'll finally be able to repay Jess," James whispered under his breath as Rose opened the book in her lap.

"Do you know who my husband was, James?" she asked in a low voice. "Jasper said he was the town elder, or something like that," he replied, shrugging. "Indeed he was, and he was an avid researcher of the seven powers and the messengers, but do you know how he died?" the old woman continued. James silently shook his head. "He was murdered, because he was close to finding out the truth," she said. "A-About Shadowrun?" James asked fearfully. "Yes, do you remember where the scroll said about where it was?" Rose asked.

James sighed, sick of the monotonous interrogation and raised an eyebrow. "How'd you know I'd read the-" "I know lad, trust me, there is only one copy of the original, and my husband owned it, and now I do, for his ancestors used it long long ago, and it survived to this day. Shadowrun lies in the demons of this world, and we call those mountains up there, the demon," she said. James' eyes widened in shock and both he and Jasper gasped in wonder. "Y-You mean, what do I have to do? What is Shadowrun? What did your husband know?" James chirped excitedly.

Rose held up a hand and flipped a few pages in the book, mumbling something slurred and undecipherable. The crystal jumped to life at her words, flaring with an intense purple aura that drowned all other light from the room, illuminating James' and Jasper's terrified features perfectly. "Shadowrun, is the doing of a beast unknown to any, and a menace to this world. It was the bane of Aradain many centuries ago, and so my ancestors sealed it in a place they called Shadowrun with a powerful spell to prevent it from causing further chaos. Of course its spirit still remains, and it wants nothing but domination and it will stop at nothing to get what it wants and that's one thing," she stopped, and James' breath caught in his chest, knowing what she would say, "souls."

James looked away sharply, a feeling of dread twisting his stomach. "Jessie is the messenger of the mind! Hers must be worth like ten of any normal humans!" he shrieked. "Exactly, she's now in touch with more of her brain than any of us will ever use, hers may provide what the beast needs to break free of its bondage, and if she's half as strong as I pick up feelings from you, she should be able to hold on until you get there. Now, we'll check her. I can do it for you, but you'll have to concentrate hard. Think about her for me, and stare into the crystal," Rose instructed.

James nodded and looked into the purple abyss of the crystal, reminding him of the color Jessie's eyes turned when she practiced her powers. He smiled as he thought of a few pleasant memories, waking up in each other's arms after Jessie had her nightmare. His smile broadened as he thought of being with her after he could save her, and tell her how much he loved her. Jessie's voice was nearly audible in his ears, tenderly whispering that she loved him back, and James could almost feel her passionate kiss upon his lips. The winged youth sighed wistfully as he envisioned waking up in Jessie's arms after making love to her, each of them pledging their soul to the other with the act, promising to love and cherish their love until the end of time.

James leaned in to kiss his vision once again, but opened his eyes as he felt Jasper tug at his sleeve. "J-James?" He opened his eyes at his tone and gasped in sorrow at what his eyes met with. A crystal clear image of Jessie appeared in the purple haze, standing with her hand to her chest and eyes shut remorsefully, her loose red hair flowing behind her with an unheard wind. "Oh, Jessie," James breathed reaching out to touch the crystal, tears sliding silently to the floor.

"Is she still alive?" Jasper asked, knowing his friend would want to know. "Her soul is, I don't know about her body, and her soul is fading quickly. I hate to say it, but I doubt she's still alive, and I doubt you can save her. The beast has found her weakness," Rose whispered ruefully. James stifled his tears, refusing to break down into sobs again, but was forced to look away as Jessie dropped to her knees, screaming his name at the top of her lungs. "I-It's me, they're using me to break her! I bet you anything that creature used us being in Team Rocket! They killed me in that one I know it! She's living her nightmare!" he choked.

Rose snapped her fingers, and the image of Jessie disappeared as the crystal flushed a milky white, the old daylight filtering back into the room. "The beast grows stronger with every passing moment, it's trapped there by an ancient spell, which drained its power and kept it sealed in the mountains, but the spell will be broken soon, you won't make it in time," she said. James leapt to his feet at the comment, taking Rose's shoulders aggressively. "How do you know? Who are you to tell me?!" he demanded. Rose sneered in contempt, and threw the young man off her. "My husband was the guardian of the ancient spell, and when he died, the secret to locking it died with him. The recent slaughter here has provided more than enough souls, the time draws near," she answered in a low voice.

James swallowed hard, the realization of the situation finally beginning to clarify. "I don't care, I'm going to save her, which is the fastest way up the mountain?" he asked drawing his sword. "You

are not going, you'll certainly be killed," the old woman answered. "If I die, so be it, I'll go out in a blaze of glory, and Jessie and I will be together either way," he said bitterly. "But James what about me? And Ash, and all your other friends?" Jasper asked piteously. James sighed, as in his fever to rescue his beloved Jessie, he had lost sight of his other friends and companions as well and squeezed his eyes shut in mental apportionment.

Ash, Misty, Brock, Meowth, and Pikachu had been wonderfully kind to him, and had shared in his grief over Jessie. He had even cried on Ash's shoulder, as the boy had cried on his over the same thing, and he never imagined being kind to "The Twerps" back in his Team Rocket days. He hadn't realized it until Jasper mentioned them, but the rest of his friends meant just as much to him as Jessie did, but he was in love with her, and he knew their hearts belonged together, and he wouldn't deny himself happiness. If he had learned anything from her, it was that he wasn't worthless and stupid as he had considered himself as a child, but a strong and valiant soul, even if it was tender and loving most of the time. He was fighting for his one true love, and though his friends would miss him if he perished, life doesn't go on forever, but times does.

"I Don't complicate matters Jasper, I know I can save her," he answered at length deciding to spare them a soapbox lecture about friendship, death and devotion. Finally making up his mind, James opened his blazing emerald eyes and turned them to Rose, who set her face in a hard scowl and remained silent. "So flying it is," he said curtly as she gave no reply to his previous question, and re-sheathed the blade of the wind. Rose huffed loudly noting that James knew she wasn't going to answer him and threw her hands into the air in exasperation, turning away from both souls. "Do what you please James, I wash my hands of you. But if you get yourself killed don't blame me! Come on Jasper, let's set up the guestroom for you," she said, her tone changing suddenly as if James had never been there at all, or miraculously and instantly disappeared.

Jasper's jaw dropped in horror at his Grandparent's suggestion and he was instantly at James' side, his arms wrapped around his waist affectionately. "No! I want to go with James," he said sternly. James smiled in reassurance at the boy's faith in him, and placed a hand on Jasper's shoulder tenderly. "Let's go kid," he said, grinning. Jasper nodded and they turned to go, ignoring the loud protests from Rose, but a deafening shriek echoed against the walls of the small room, originating at the crystal stopped everyone dead in their tracks.

James' eyes went wild with fear as he recognized the scream and clasped a hand to his mouth. "Jessie!" The scream of agony and mental anguish resounded throughout the room again, this time followed by a fit of sobs. "James, if you can hear this, please forgive me, please. I never meant for you to be hurt, never meant for you to Lose your life over me, I miss you so much! And I wish I could see you again for just five minutes, so I could tell you how much you meant to me, and apologize for every last time I hurt your feelings, every time I hit you, insulted you, acted like I didn't care. I cared about you James, and I sorely wish you knew that."

James looked away, finally understanding that whatever was holding his beloved had a powerful ability to manipulate the mind. It was breaking her slowly through her own mind, as her own powers weren't

developed enough to know that she wasn't in her tangible body. The monster had killed him for her to see, knowing that she cared deeply for him, and knowing that their trial in Team Rocket was especially painful. He knew now the significance of the dreams they both endured and that he was the only one capable of rescuing her.

"Oh lord, James she must love you more than life itself! The beast knows exactly how to hurt her and it'll be moving in for the kill soon! All is lost," Rose muttered mournfully. "I bet I died in her arms," James mused spitefully, "well I'm sure as hell not going to sit around here and watch my best friend die! I've taken a backseat to everything in life, to my parents, Team Rocket, and even Vinetra, but I am not going to sit back for this! Jessie needs me, and I won't let her down! I have to be strong for her, even if it's just this once! She's been strong for me for as long as I can remember, but this time Jess, I'm going to save you!" James yelled theatrically drawing his sword as he stormed toward the door.

Jasper gave his Grandparent one last adoring embrace before rushing after the winged young man, calling out his name to hail him, and the old woman stood stationary as she watched them go. She blinked a few times in confusion, and even mild awe at the strength she knew James possessed. "If anyone can save the girl and Aradain itself, he can," she whispered and moved to cover the wildly pulsating purple crystal carefully, muttering a few lines of a poem her husband had known all his life and had been passed down from the generations. "\_Reach out to yourself like never you did; you alone can rescue a soul from the shadows which it slid."\_

James closed his eyes against the stinging winds that whipped his shoulder length blue hair about his face as he sailed deftly through the air, artfully avoiding the tall spires of the last building of Shadow River that bordered the small ring of woodland that encircled the mountains. He knew what had happened to his friend now, and he knew what he had to do, and he wouldn't let what had intended to happen become so. Jessie had been killed, or perhaps it had been a mock death, he didn't know, but it was to ensure that no one would attempt to retrieve her. The beast, whatever it was had taken her to use to gain power to release itself from the ancient spell binding it to Shadowrun.

James now understood his poem, as well as Jessie's myth, finally comprehending the purpose of Shadowrun. It was literally a river of souls, kept to build the power of the sadistic beast that controlled it and that was why the story mentioned people never coming back, or coming back corrupted. The body can't live without its soul, or a marred one.

"James! Down there! Look!" Jasper wriggled an arm free from James' grasp, as he carried him in his arms as he flew. Sensing his panic, James looked to where the boy was pointing and, seeing nothing at all but the mountains beneath him, he shook his head. "What? I don't see anything!" he replied raising an eyebrow. "How can you not see that!? Land James! Right now!" Jasper cried with such authority, James complied with his wishes, dropping dexterously from the sky to perch on a small outcropping of rock just above a narrow valley.

Only then did Jasper react to it, throwing his arms about James' waist and hiding his eyes, crying out in terror. James looked down into the seemingly lifeless valley and sighed when he saw merely

rocks and a few scattered bushes and shrubs, holding Jasper tenderly. "There's nothing there, what's wrong?" he asked. "James Believe in it, you have to believe to see!" he replied, his voice stricken with utter panic. This disturbed James, and he held him closer as the boy's breathing became labored and shallow, beads of sweat trickling down his forehead. "Jasper, what!? Believe in what!?" he exclaimed. "T-the myth," he muttered and fell limp in James' arms.

He gasped and gently laid the boy down, brushing his ebony hair away from his eyes. "No! Jasper! Jasper! Come on kid!" he hissed. Panic seized him as no response came from his friend and he slipped two shaking fingers beneath his chin. "Please still be here," he whispered, knowing if Jasper was dead, he would have no other reassurance of his strength. James heaved a sigh of relief as he found a strong steady pulse, and sat next to the unconscious form of the little boy, disturbed as to why he had passed out.

He removed his black cloak and tucked it lovingly about Jasper's still form, standing as he did so. James smiled as he reluctantly left Jasper's side for a brief moment and peered over the edge of the cliff his friend had been so terrified of. He frowned as he still saw nothing but the same nearly white rocks, dirt, and assorted shrubbery he had seen before. "What did he mean, I have to believe in the myth?" he muttered sitting by the edge of the small cliff, "of course I believe in it!"

James sat, crossing his legs and cupped his chin in his hands, his brow knitting deeply as he scrutinized the landscape in front of him, and he sighed as he finally began to doubt his reasons for being there. Perhaps he had been wrong all along, and his Jessie really was dead and gone forever, as nothing seemed to point to her still being in the mortal realm. He had seen the image in the crystal ball, but then again it could have been simply an illusion. "Oh Jessie, I need some sign from you!" he moaned.

As if on cue, there was an abrupt and utterly complete silence as all movement halted. No wind rustled through the trees, no Pokemon dared move from their spots, and even James felt slightly afraid to breathe as a singular sound dared to break the silence. It began in the small valley below him, at first seeming tame and calm, but rising in a hideous crescendo to a near deafening wail of tortured souls. "W-wha?" James croaked looking over his shoulder to see a black wisp of mist curl lazily past his vision and dissipate nearly instantly with a feminine shriek of terror, and he stood swiftly, his stomach twisting in terror as he drew his sword. He swallowed hard as he turned to face what he believed to be the source of the entity and tentatively stuck the tip of the blade into the slowly thickening black haze. "You do not believe," a disembodied voice whispered menacingly.

James felt tears spring to his eyes, as if the voice was telling him he didn't love the woman he had ventured thus far to rescue, and didn't believe she was alive. "That's not true! I love Jessie and she's alive!" he shouted to console himself. He knew he believed it, and he stepped to the very edge of the miniscule escarpment glaring with ice rimmed emerald eyes to the valley, which he now recognized as a dry riverbed. It had to be some sort of test of his faith in himself and his abilities, verifying he was truly worthy for something. "She has perished, your search is futile," the voice called out again.

James smiled, and closed his eyes, mentally visualizing Jessie, every curve of her well-toned body, her crimson mane of hair, her interchangeable sapphire and purple eyes and sighed wistfully. "My Jessie would never let herself be killed by the likes of you!" he cried, his eyes remaining shut. His stomach turned as his vision of his best friend took on a life of its own, seeming to be an image projected on the inside of his eyelids and she smiled at him, nodding before disappearing with a gentle pulse of purple light. "Jessie You are with me," he breathed a single tear sliding down his cheek.

He drew in a deep breath and opened his eyes, knowing exactly what he would see and raised his sword to the sky valiantly. The howl flared with a new intensity, the winds answering it with the emotional surge from their prophet, whipping his short blue hair savagely about his face. "I am the messenger of the wind, and I have just as much power as Jessie does! I know you have her and I want her back!" he called to the miasma of black and dark purple mist.

It erupted from the river with a surge of purple electricity at James' defiant words, a pair of menacing eyes materializing out of it, turning their spiteful glare to the winged young man. "I sensed your return fool, you are ridiculously brave, but the girl is mine," the same voice hissed. The evil power was so obvious about it, James could almost feel it in his body, and he was forced to widen his stance to keep upright. He gritted his teeth as he struggled to raise his fiery emerald eyes to the black bane before him, and scowled at the entity, resting the tip of his sword in the dirt. "She'll never let you win! I challenge you! Take me, and if I can defeat you, I get Jessie back, I lose, and you can kill me, and have another soul for your collection!" he growled drawing his hand across his chest in a definitive gesture. There was silence from the beast as it pondered the mortal's suggestion, and James swore he could see it grin maliciously at him. "Hmmm, I love to play, let's see how good of a player you are, boy!" the voice spat suddenly.

James gasped in terror as a veritable web of the ebon effluvium solidified into malevolent threads as they erupted from the body, suspended with an obvious abhorrence of all things good in the world in the air before him. James stood his ground against them, his heart soaring with bravery and love, and he didn't flinch as they rushed forward, entwining about his waist, forcing the air from his lungs with a constricting grasp. The winged young man held tightly to his sword, refusing to lose it as the entity lifted him from the ground, squeezing him tighter as it slowly receded into an unseen mouth of a cave beneath the rock formations that formed the run.

Shadow flinched as she felt an unexpected surge of energy from her captive, crying out in surprise. "Something wrong master?" Rill asked apprehensively. "No! Let me concentrate, I'll enjoy testing this boy. He loves my link to the outside world!" she retorted angrily. "Sorry," Rill muttered genuinely and skulked off to make himself useful by polishing Shadow's crystal ball. James let his vision go black as the black muck beneath the heavy mist completely covered his body dragging him slowly underneath the earth to their residence in the shadow realm, his last thoughts before unconsciousness claimed him of Jessie. "Let's see how well he plays my games."

Jasper sat up and let a single tear fall as we watched the last traces of his friend and the ethereal being disappear into the

cavern, leaving only a small rill of inky black water in it's wake. He stood up, still clutching James' cloak, which he had woken up under to his chest, and walked solemnly to the edge of the cliff. He sighed and whispered a scant message, audible only to himself, and the winds, blowing timorously for the safety of their messenger. "Good luck James."

## 9. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 9: Sounds of Silence

### Chapter 9: Sounds of Silence

The creature yawned as it opened one purple eye furtively, finally awakening from its long sleep. It rolled both eyes as they met with nothing but darkness as usual and the reptile opened the other eye to allow an adjustment. Darkness was eternal in it's home, the only source of light from the pallid multicolored rocks that seemed to have a life of their own. The sand near the banks of the black river was white, and reflected some of the meager light off it's shining crystals, but even that was barely enough to see by.

Stretching and yawning again, broadly, the creature rose from its makeshift nest and spread its dragon-wings, gliding gently to the ground for a refreshing swim. It plodded gently and carefully along the sand, enjoying the feeling of it against its hard scales and claws and folded its wings tightly against its sides. His morning trek was interrupted however by something lying motionless in the sand, one end of it still in the black river.

Curiosity peaked, the little dragon inched forward, gasping at the strange object. It looked living, as what he thought was the chest rose and fell in a regular pattern, but it didn't seem to be awake. Upon closer inspection, he was forced to shake his head in disbelief, having to look even closer to confirm his suspicions. Not only was it living, this thing had color!

Normally, everything in the caverns the dragon resided in was black, or shades of purple, and nothing he had ever seen compared to the thing near the banks of the river. He sat on his haunches touching what he recognized as the head of the new creature, and found that it was soft and silky, a bit tangled, but it delighted the dragon regardless. It shone in what little light there was and the dragon snickered in glee as he realized it was a deep cerulean blue. "Azure! This creature has fur made out of azure!" he thought to himself. He walked along the length of the creature, running his claw down it as he did so, soft white material, then more blue under it. He frowned, the blue substance he felt was not the same as he had seen before, and he stopped to inspect it. He put both claws into it, rustling it vivaciously until some came off into his claw and he nodded approvingly. Feathers, he had seen those before.

The dragon began toward the end of the thing which was still in the water, but was stopped as it moved, groaning loudly. He shrieked and dashed to the side, his voice resonating harshly against the black, iridescent stone, watching as the top half of the creature rose from the ground, hacking and coughing, water spilling from it. It brushed the wet blue fur away and the dragon stared in awe as he saw the thing had eyes, and that they were a brilliant emerald green.



"Emeralds! The creature has eyes made of emerald and azure hair and wings too!" he cried excitedly.

The thing raised an eyebrow as it lay back down on the bank rubbing its temples ruefully. "Great, now where am I?" it muttered in a distinctly masculine voice. "Y-You speak!" the dragon chirped. The creature turned his head, still not bothering to lift it from the sand and raised an eyebrow at him. "A dragon?" the creature inquired. "Yes my liege, Draco the black dragon at your service oh wondrous jewel creature," he said bowing. "Jewel creature? Just plain James is fine with me Draco," the winged young man answered as he sat up.

Draco sat and coiled his thin tail about his hind legs regally grinning toothily, but still respectfully at James, who inspected him carefully, his eyes tracing over his coiled crests protecting the sides of his head with a dull black crystal in the center. His entire body was lined with glossy black scales matching the bony horn-like helixes, and though he was much bigger than Riley, he still looked very similar, save for the fact that Riley was also very thin. His old friend back in Vertigo was more like a snake with wings than a dragon, and this thing looked the part of the image he had always had of dragons. James grinned crookedly and smoothed his hair back as he surveyed his new surroundings. "So, can you tell me where I am?" he asked offhandedly as he rubbed his temples.

Draco nodded vigorously, standing on his haunches and clasping his claws eagerly. "Oh yes, this is what most mortals call Shadowrun, named so for the shadowy river!" he said cheerfully. James closed his eyes and smiled lovingly as he rose gently from the bank. "Then I'm in the right place," he said as he brushed the white sand off his clothing and shook his wings and tail free of it. "So how'd you die? Nobly in a battle maybe? You do have a sword. Or maybe you were murdered by an assassin! Even better!" the dragon asked James. He simply raised an eyebrow at the odd question and squinted his as he examined his body for any injuries, answering simply. "I'm not dead." Draco gasped sharply at this, touching his leg in utter amazement and awe. "Excuse me, but why are you here if you're not dead?" he asked cocking his head to one side thoughtfully.

James didn't answer him and blinked against the darkness, muttering something inaudible under his breath before proceeding away from the river and towards the darkness of the cave system, his boots making no sound on the soft sand. "James! Wait! Shadow will find you and kill you for sure!" Draco protested and the winged young man stopped. "Shadow?" he asked, his interest perked. "Yes! She is the beast that collects souls, but only lives lost here can be used to feed her power! Otherwise they speed too quickly to the afterlife, and not even she has the power to stop them," he replied.

James smiled deviously as he understood finally why Jessie had been taken on the battle field, and why he was made to think she was dead, but his grin widened as his heart soared with love and hope again, knowing that Jessie was still alive. "Then she's just who I want to see," he said and began walking again. "Wait! I'm coming with you!" Draco yelped and followed his companion into the black abyss of the vast system of intricate caves which not even he had traversed fully.

Shadow's malevolent purple eyes flashed excitedly as she felt

Jessie's will to live falter, and weaken even more so than it had in the past few days. Jessie screamed as Shadow projected another torturing image into her mind, which wasn't powerful enough yet to discern reality from illusion, and she was almost literally living her nightmares. Shadow had reminded her painfully and poignantly of every hurtful event of her life, the first being nearly losing James in the dungeon of The Saffron building. She had been able to distort it that particular one horribly, warping it so she saw her best friend die in her arms, weakening her spirit more so.

"Almost Jessie, give up and it'll stop, you can die and go on to the afterlife in peace! All you have to do is give up!" the feline mused harshly. The girl struggled hard against the shackles which bound her to the platform Shadow had set aside for her sacrifices, the crystal ball standing in waiting to gather the souls, moaning in mental anguish. "Poor sweetheart, this one must be terrible for you!" Shadow said laughing heartily, "well the more painful the better!"

Jessie closed her eyes as she listened to the voice, refusing to give up just yet, but knowing she wouldn't last much longer without James to reassure her. For she knew nothing but the horrific visions that Shadow created for her, thinking it was an alternate dimension, or reality she had been sent to, not knowing she was in actuality a prisoner of her own mind. \_"You know you can't live without James."\_

Jessie squeezed her eyes shut harder at the mention of her long deceased' but still sorely missed friend for practically the fifth time that day. "I can live without him! I can!" she insisted, her words more to attempt to cheer herself. The tears threatened to fall once more and she shook her head to clear it, gripping her tangled and disheveled red hair between her fingers in wretchedness. "Why the hell do you keep mentioning him? Why not my mother? She's dead too you know!" she spat furiously.

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\_"You can't live without either of them. You know you can't go on, and they tell me Meowth isn't going to make it."\_ Jessie screamed, falling to her knees onto the floor, remembering the ill and dying Pokemon she had taken to the treatment center weeks ago. He'd contracted a rare and deadly disease more common in the cat-type Pokemon and his health had slowly deteriorated. She had paid every expense to attempt to save his life, but his health had been poor when he'd finally allowed himself to be taken and it was finally giving out. "Why take Meowth too? Do you have no mercy? Why do you want me to die?" she sobbed.

The silence that followed was thick and malevolent, and Jessie raised her head, wiping the last of the tears from her cheeks as a vision came to her mind. It was of a little boy, with shoulder length ebony hair, pearl white skin, green eyes standing out from it like emeralds on pure white silk. He called out her name, and she was suddenly aware of a very familiar white power, surging somewhere in the back of her mind. She felt the affection and memories attached to it, and put a hand to her mouth as she realized what it was, and what she remembered clearly from Aradain. "James," she whispered, her voice wavering, "it can't be!" The boy smiled at her, nodded approvingly, and disappeared in an explosion of white light, leaving her alone again in her mind.

Jessie closed her eyes, feeling for the energy again, breathing heavily with fear and hope. "She wants me to die, because she needs my power!" Jessie sensed the evil entity somewhere far away, choking on the foul thick presence of it, realizing its intentions through a psychic link. "This isn't real! James is alive! And he's somewhere close!" She screamed furiously and victoriously as she stood from her bed, clenching her fists as her eyes and body flared a valiant shade of deep purple. "Shadow!" she shrieked the demon's name in challenge the purple aura deepening and beginning to rise from her limbs like famished and rancorous flames.

Shadow reeled backwards in terror as Jessie's tangible body lurched forward, screaming her name again as her real eyes opened wide with hatred. Her hands turned over, fingers spread as far apart as they would go, eyes searching wildly for anything to focus on, but finding only darkness she dug her claws deep into the ancient stone, putting several deep lacerations in it. Jessie screamed again, her eyes flaring an intense purple, her voice resonating loudly from deep within her soul and body.

Shadow bared her fangs at the surge of energy, hissing and cursing under her breath. "Well, I didn't think that boy would be a problem, I underestimated him! But that will change very, very soon!" she spat adjusting her charm that hung at her chest and turned over her shoulder, malicious purple eyes lowered to an abhorrent level. She melted into the darkness, leaving Jessie to struggle against her psychically sealed bonds, and seeking out the young man that had been a thorn in her side for far too long.

James drew his sword apprehensively, pressing his back against the wall as his eyes searched fruitlessly for any dangers. "God it's no use! I can't see anything down here!" he groaned, "but I can't, and won't give up on you Jess." Draco cocked his head to the side in confusion, but slapped himself in the forehead as he realized James was not native to the darkness, and human. "You're going about it all the wrong way!" he said exasperatedly. James directed his useless eyes down to where he heard the voice and sighed in repressed aggravation and frustration.

"So what do you suggest?" he asked with an obviously irritated tone. Draco sat back on his haunches, puffing a tiny coil of unseen purple smoke from his nostrils, searching the young man's soul. He found there a mixture of strong and pungent feelings and emotions, most of them centered around a memory of a red-haired young girl. "Well?" James asked impatiently. Draco smirked and raised his eyes and practically watched James' face flush red. "You're in love with someone, and you've come here to search for her," he mused deviously.

James drew back apprehensively, drawing in a sharp breath of consternation. "How? H-How did?" he stuttered, unable to comprehend how the dragon knew what his purpose was. "I can sense it within you, I, as does everything down here, have an array of psychic powers," Draco answered. James nodded, and fingered his chin thoughtfully. "So, how do I find Shadow and Jessie?" he asked.

Draco stood, bringing himself closer to James and illuminated the purple crystals in the center of the coils on either side of his head, casting a dim purple glow about the young man's feet. "I can

only provide so much light for you, you have to do the rest," he said. James raised an eyebrow, confused not for the first time that day and raised the glowing white tip of the blade of the wind to his face. It glimmered hopefully, but provided no more light to see by than Draco did, and though James was comforted somewhat by his sword, he still felt hopeless in the situation. "I still don't understand," he said at length.

Draco sighed, lowering his head in exasperation. "See with your heart and not your eyes, seeing is never believing, especially not here, but a heart like yours James, is never deceived. It is driven by true and unconditional love, which in this case, is stronger even than Shadow," he said quietly. James nodded and understood. He understood that he was never going to be able to rely on his conscious and rational mind in the caves, and he would have to rely on letting his love and connection to Jessie lead him.

James re-sheathed his blade and smiled warmly, motioning for Draco to follow, oblivious to the sleek form of a cat that darted behind a stalagmite, following him. "Follow your heart, he says," Shadow mused, mocking Draco's words, "well his heart won't do any good when he watches it stop beating in my paw!" She cackled viciously to herself and continued to follow, wondering just how far the young man could get.

Jessie was suddenly aware of a sharp pain as she struggled with her manacles, noting that she was pulling so hard they had bitten into the skin of her wrists, and she snarled in frustration. "I've got to get out of here! Shadow really will kill James if she finds him! Concentrate Jessie! You can break the spell on these!" she hissed through her teeth. Her already purple aura deepened further until it was nearly black, illuminating the room so that everything was visible.

The black river that ran toward the bottom of the stone pedestal, resonated against the iridescent black stone walls and lapped at the brilliantly white sand, creating the only noise besides the young woman's struggles. Jessie drew in a deep breath, focusing her powers at the bonds and gritted her teeth as the powerful psychic spell fought back at her mind.

She shrieked as she felt it's black presence, but stood her ground, her purple aura fading slightly as she met with her adversary. "No!" she screeched forcing it back with a surge of her power, and smiling at its wail of agony. It receded as she directed another bolt of psychic energy at it, her right arm breaking free of the shackle, followed by her left.

Jessie sat upright for the first time in the, what seemed like years, she had been under Shadow's spell, smiling broadly as she narrowed her eyes at the metal cuffs about her ankles. They flared a brilliant purple as the mechanics of the ancient locks exploded with a flash of purple and tiny parts of the lock. The metal strap about her waist exploded in flurry of metal parts as well, and she quickly swung her legs over the edge of the altar, noting she was still in her armor from the battle, and it still had the sword hole through it. Wincing as she fell to her knees with fatigue, Jessie closed her eyes, but smiled, knowing that freedom and her friends were not far away.

She mustered the rest of her strength to stand, and gripped her still

aching stomach as she staggered toward the river. She leaned heavily against a joined stalactite and stalagmite, panting at the extreme difficulty of moving. Her spirits lifted, however, as she saw that she had a clear path leading into the cave system, and using her psychic powers, could deduct the way out. "Don't worry guys, I'm coming back," she said quietly and proceeded across the Shadowrun.

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\_"Jaaaaames."\_ The winged young man leapt in fear at the sing-song calling of his name. He drew his sword with shaking hands, pointing it uselessly into the darkness. "Wha? Who? Who's there?" he called with a wavering voice. \_"Jaaaaaames!"\_ It was oddly jovial, calling his name again in an echoed, disembodied voice. Draco tensed, pressing his scaled side into James' leg apprehensively. "I don't like the sound of that," he muttered. "Me neither," James replied.

The duo listened closer as it called James' name again, and he slapped a hand over his gaping mouth as he recognized the terrifyingly familiar tone. "It can't be," he breathed. He was answered by a bright flash followed by a faint purple glow from behind an iridescent black stone, pulsing warmly toward him as a shadowed figure stepped from behind it. "I've been waiting for you James, I knew you'd come!" The winged young man restrained his urge to rush forward into the arms of the figure, stepping forward cautiously. It bore a terrifyingly familiar figure, complete with elongated cat ears and the thin whip-like tail of an Abra. "It can't be. JJessie?" he ventured.

She stepped fully into the purple light, the shadows unveiling her face slowly revealing the features and deep azure eyes of the woman James loved and had come to rescue. He fought his urge to burst into tears of joy, rush to her and take her into his arms to hold her again and never let go, as something felt wrong to him. It seemed too simple, like she had been merely wandering in the dark caverns waiting for someone to rescue her, and that was quite unlike the Jessie that James knew. "Of course it's me James! God I've missed you," she said stepping forward.

James took a hesitant step back, tightening his grip around the hilt of his sword and swallowing hard. She seemed too calm and reserved to him, and the smug smile on her lips was suspicious and he drew back at the sight of it, needing proof of her genuineness. "How can I be sure?" he asked carefully. Jessie continued walking to him, chuckling warmly as she rolled her eyes. "Why are you so hesitant to believe?" she asked practically. "I saw you killed, and I need proof it's you," he replied, tears threatening his ability of calm speech.

Jessie stopped, looking hurt and regarded her friend cynically, her pale skin rippling with blear light from the black river, and scowled at his disquietude to her. "Okay fine, ask me something! Only something you and I would know," she said at length, placing her claws on her hips, tail flicking with her swiftly shortening temper. James looked away, hesitant to recall the events that had been very secretive and private between them, but knowing that neither of them had forgotten one second of the trial Giovanni put them through. "When I thought I wasn't going to make it out of Team Rocket, I asked you to say goodbye, so you whispered one last message to me, and I

swear I'll never forget what you said to me, what was it?" he asked, guilefully concealing an artful smile.

Jessie smirked, huffing nervously at the question. "What kind of dumb question is that?" she asked. "Answer it or I'll kill you, because only my Jessie knows this, and I know she'll never forget," James answered leveling his sword to her. She looked away, hand pressed in comfort against her chest, and James could barely detect a glimmer of light reflected in a tear falling from her cheek. She sniffed them back loudly, turning to James with a warm smile and wiped her eyes as she edged closer to him. "Well, I knew you weren't going to die, but I didn't want to upset you, so I said goodbye. I still wouldn't let you go though, not to anything James," she said, another tear sliding down her cheek.

James let his tears fall, gripping the hilt of his sword in fury raising it as he screeched in mental agony and angst, charging forward to drive it roughly through Jessie's chest. She screamed in pain and crumpled under James strong thrust, slicing her claws open on the blade. She looked balefully at him as they stood in stalemate, and her genuine expression of hurt caused tears to stream down James face, as it looked so much like he was actually stabbing his best friend. She genuinely looked betrayed, and the mere thought of hurting her made James physically and mentally ill, and he was killing the distraction effort. No matter how many times over he told himself it wasn't her, it looked, sounded and acted so much like his best friend, it felt like the actual exploit. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and glared bitterly at her, narrowing his eyes in utter contempt and malice. "Wrong answer, Jessie never said goodbye, because she knew I was going to make it," he hissed.

Jessie slumped backwards to the soft sand, and James ripped his sword from her body with a hoarse cry of grief as it melted into a small black puddle, sliding with a sickening sound to the river. "You're smarter than I thought you were! But the girl is mine," it hissed and James felt the color drain from his face. "S-she is alive," he muttered in disbelief as the black bane disappeared fully, falling to his knees, sickened at the fact he had seemingly just killed his best friend. The genuine look of utter hurt and betrayal on her face still lingered in his mind, and he looked down to his still clean sword resting gently in the white sand.

He drew in a sharp breath as he closed his eyes, tears sliding silently down his cheeks, and oblivious to everything but his sorrow. He felt his object sliding farther and farther out of reach, and he began to believe what he suspected all along, and couldn't rescue his friend. "I'm such a coward, I can't even get rid of a doppelganger without bursting into tears. I can't do it, I'm so sorry Jessie," he whispered as Draco put a claw atop his thigh, "I still love you."

Draco had no clue why the winged young man was crying, cocking his head to one side thoughtfully. "You just committed a valiant act James, it takes a brave man to kill the woman he loves, metaphorically of course," he assured him. James shook his head as his sobs abated and sighed, running a hand through his hair.

He couldn't bring himself to say aloud why he sobbed over it, but he knew deep in his heart the many reasons. He often felt as if he were a coward, worthless, and stupid, as that was how his parents and

Jessibelle had made him feel as a child. They constantly told him how much they hated him and his ways, and no matter how hard he tried he would never be as good as they were. He knew that they didn't love him, and the feeling of being accepted by no one but a Pokemon hurt James deeply.

He had been able to overcome it only when he had met Jessie, after his parents had sent him to Pokemon Tech in an attempt to reform him. She accepted him for who he was, and had always allowed him to be himself. He ran away from everything to be with her, and only in Team Rocket, even though they lived a hard life, he was truly happy. "I should have known that Jessie was the only one who-" he paused, reflecting on what he was about to say and smiled.

James remembered why he loved her and his smile broadened as his eyes drifted to his tail sprawled across the sand to his side, taking a long feather into his hand. It reminded him of her, and how she always told him and reminded him that he was a wonderful person, and he was much better than anyone in his family. Being with her gave him a sense of family and love he never had before, but as they grew older together, he was forced to deal with feelings for her he wasn't aware of as a child. He'd finally embraced them, knowing that he loved her with all his heart, and he stood swiftly, brandishing his sword menacingly toward the darkness. James knew deep inside of him that everything Jessie had always known and reminded him were true and his soul felt renewed, his lust for the adventure and to rescue his soul mate burning brightly behind hopeful emerald irises.

Draco looked on as a light, yet unfelt wind caressed James' face, tossing his shoulder length hair and feathers affectionately and he backed hesitantly away. He smiled broadly and re-sheathed his sword, spreading his wings lightly to greet the essence of his inherited power. He drew in a deep breath, and unannounced, started off along the path he had chosen, motioning for Draco to follow. "Come on Draco, let's go." The dragon smiled to himself as he followed the young man, knowing he'd just defeated a few personal demons, but the worst were yet to come.

Shadow's scream of fury resonated shrilly above the gentle rush of the river as she returned to find Jessie gone, as in her incarnation of her, she's broken the psychic link to her mind and hadn't known she'd escaped. She was able to track the girl's location with the link, and she had to have Jessie there physically to establish it. Now that it was broken, Jessie would be nearly impossible to find in the great labyrinth that Shadowrun had carved out centuries before. "Blast that wretched girl!" Shadow fumed, black fur bristling with anger as she surveyed the demolished manacles and deep claw marks on her stone.

Her lips curled in a smug snide smile, however, as she noticed the prints of Jessie's boots showing obviously in the sand betraying the path she had taken for her. "Of course, there's always the old fashioned way," she mused placing a paw in the nearest footprint. "So you want to play hide and seek little girl, well let's see how you fare against me!" she hissed, her body shimmering a brilliant purple.

She closed her eyes as it dissipated, liquefying into the black gel she had been after James had killed her replication of Jessie, and slid into the river. Shadow recoiled, reserving her energy as she

picked up Jessie's trail of indiscrete footprints in the white sand. Once she had a clear idea of which way they went, she unleash the energy she had stored in a lightning bolt of pure purple energy, surging through the black water unseen, a merely mental smile broadening as she honed in on her victim.

The pounding of her own heart was the only thing audible in Jessie's ears as she ran blindly down the passageway lit only by a small ball of energy she had created for that purpose. She directed it in front of her, illuminating grotesquely the features of the rocks and shore of the roaring river currents. "I gotta find a way out of here!" she hissed to herself as she disturbed a small gathering of black lizard-like creatures.

She could feel the familiar presence of Shadow in the back of her mind, which only caused her to run harder, the utter terror the driving force behind her flight. "You can run, but you should have known you couldn't hide!" she heard Shadow's malevolent hiss and stopped in her tracks. The voice had been right next to her, and Jessie backed away as a sudden feeling of foreboding twisted her stomach. "No, no not her again!" was all she could manage, her eyes darting about for any sign of the beast, but as if to spite her, as soon as her eyes drifted to the water at her feet, it erupted with the vague figure of a feline. Jessie's eyes widened in terror as the muzzle, mouth open and teeth bared formed, it's legs preceding it with the leap. Jessie watched as the claws unsheathed from the malevolent paws outstretched for the kill, her shriek of terror resounding loudly as the feline descended upon her with a malevolent yowl.

Jessie felt the weight force her to the stinging sand and keep her pinned, much to her dismay, as the aqueous form took the shape of the loathed entity. "Shadow!" she cried furiously. Shadow rippled with purple as she materialized fully, merely laughing in spite, and the charm bearing the symbol of the mind at her chest glowing brightly. "Having fun?" she asked stepping off of Jessie as she lifted her with her powerful abilities of psychic mastery.

The young woman found herself unable to answer, her throat suddenly constricting of it's own accord and glared daggers from flaming purple eyes toward the cat. "I'll just kill you now! Sure your spirit will flee, but I have Rill at the exit to catch it for me! You're never leaving this place alive," she hissed. Jessie lost the struggle for air, her movements slowing with the lack thereof as she gripped at her throat uselessly. "No! I can't lose! Not now. Not when I'm so close!" she thought to herself as her vision clouded with points of white light. "Jessie! No!" A sharp cry was just audible over the sound of the rush of blood in her ears and was followed by the enraged Shadow's cry of pain.

Air once again rushed into Jessie's lungs as she was dropped from suspension and landed hard into the sand. A fierce war cry resonated against the unforgiving black stone and Shadow recoiled, stumbling to the side as if from a blow and fell in front of the psychic young woman, a very familiar blade protruding from her slick black chest. Jessie struggled into a kneeling position, gasping at the wing and wind-like dācor upon the sword and looked up to see a winged silhouette pull it from the lifeless form of Shadow. He had a fierce determined scowl on his face, and didn't notice her reach out to him as if her were an angel, or some ethereal being. "Oh my god, James!"



she cried joyously as she realized it was the actual being, and not a mental projection from Shadow that stood in front of her.

He looked up, and mirrored her smile briefly, but was forced to back away at the cruel hiss from the wounded cat. "Jess stay back!" he answered as Shadow begrudgingly lifted herself from the ground, the black ooze that was her blood streaming from the wound and down her foreleg to the ground. She glared hideously at the man who had ensanguined her, baring her bloodstained fangs menacingly. "You are more trouble than you're worth boy!" she hissed opening her mouth as a ball of crackling energy gathered between menacing fangs.

James held his ground, holding out his still bloody sword in a challenge. Shadow's slick black fur stood on end as she fired the bolt of magic, howling in pain and fury. The winged young man lowered his eyes at the beast, deflecting her blow with his sword, sending it hurtling back into her slashed chest and slamming her lithe form against a tall outcropping of rock. She lay motionless for only a moment, before unsuccessfully attempting to stand to assess the situation, crumpling back down to the ground with mew of pain. \_"I cannot fight in my condition now, that boy is strong! I have completely and utterly underestimated him!" \_she thought to herself, and realized she could no longer hold her ground against his fierce battling tactics. James was extraordinarily excellent at handling his nimble blade, and both feline and human knew it. "I must take time to heal myself, but I will be back, I cannot be defeated by mortals such as the likes of you!" she sibilated and glistened with a bright purple light.

James held his sword rigid as she disappeared in a brilliant flash of purple sparks, leaving only the puddle of black blood. He waited a few moments in the silence, blinked in confusion, and when he was certain the beast would not return, drove his bloodied blade into the sand to cleanse it. He shook his head at the life fluid staining the perfect white sand as he turned his loving smile to his beloved for the first time in months, opening his arms to welcome her into them, knowing that at last he had found what he had suspected all along.

Jessie let her tears of joy fall, accepting the invitation and rushing into James' arms, both of them falling to their knees in the sand with a mutual meek cry of hope, tears and joyous, elated laughter. James cried tears of pure ecstasy and euphoria at holding Jessie again, and after he had the satisfaction of feeling her tangible form in his arms, he took her shoulders, pushing her away slightly to look upon her face. "Is it really you?" he asked, his voice still wavering with tears, "Jessie? My Jessie?"

"Of course it's me James! God I could have sworn you were dead!" she cried, still sobbing as she threw her arms about his neck again, and this time, James could not and didn't even make an effort control his sobs. "Jessie! Oh Jessie, Jessie! I thought I'd lost you forever! I thought Rill killed you! I'd given up hope!" he wailed. He cried harder than he had when she had died' burying his face into her neck as he held her tighter, never wanting to let go again. "Shadow showed me your death, and I thought you were dead too! James I never want to be without you again! I never want to be without any of my friends again!" Jessie cried in response. "Me? I thought \_you\_ were dead! Oh god Jessie you have no idea how much I missed you!" he cried kissing her furtively on the cheek. She didn't notice the display of

affection through her wracking sobs, oblivious to everything but the joy of seeing the friend Shadow had seemingly killed again.

"James you have no idea what that monster did to me!" she sobbed, clutching his shirt in her claws tightly. James closed his eyes, forcing his lips to say what his heart protested every day since the incident. "I know Jess, she used Team Rocket didn't she? Jess it wasn't real! She used your own mind against you!" he said through his own tears. "It was so real though! It was if I was there again. B-but she twisted it all around, youJames you died in my arms! Just like my dreams! I lost you forever and I thought my life was over," she cried, "over before it really even started."

James was touched at her notion that her life would be worthless without him and resisted the strong urge to tell her that he loved her right then and there. If he did so, it might seem as if he was merely consoling her, or perhaps she would think that his emotions were false because of being newly reunited. He didn't want to risk her taking it the wrong way, and she didn't need to complicate her already dazed and confused mind with taking her feelings for him into consideration. He also found himself at the same situation he had been in each time he'd tried to tell her how he felt, too afraid of what she might say, and in her emotional state it could be heartbreaking. He made a silent vow to himself, to tell her once and for all how much he loved her, when she had rested and been back in the company of friends. Then he'd do exactly what he'd told Jasper he'd do, and this time, he would do it for real.

The duo sat in each other's arms for what seemed like hours, time melting into pure bliss as they felt their missing halves again part of their lives. James rocked Jessie gently as their sobs abated, smoothing her hair soothing with his hand. He reveled in their mutual ecstasy as he could again touch the silky crimson mane and hold her tightly, feeling his life and soul become one again. He had felt like half of himself had been absent, and his life had been empty and meaningless if he couldn't share it with her. Of course he had grown much closer to Ash and the rest of his friends, but his deeply rooted love for Jessie and her being his best friend in the world had made him feel dead himself.

He thought back to the poem as he held her tighter to his chest, recalling the part about rescuing a soul from the shadows. He hadn't rescued just Jessie, he'd saved himself as well, he had saved one soul, as he and Jessie made up the two halves of it. He felt a sense of security at having her back, and knowing that he had been determined enough and courageous enough to take on a powerful being and win her back from it made him feel like he had finally defeated all the demons and scars of his past. He knew in his heart he would be able to brave telling his one true love how he felt, and knew also his life would forever be complete.

The void Jessie had left when she had been gone from James' life had been filled once again, and James finally felt truly happy. He closed his eyes as Jessie cuddled closer to him, nuzzling her face into his neck affectionately, but was forced to open them at the small sound from the black dragon who still sat on his haunches by James' erect sword. "I hate to be the emotional tear-jerker reunion crasher, but you really need to get out of here," he muttered gesturing toward the river. James nodded and draped Jessie's arm around his shoulders, standing and assisting her to her feet as well. "Come on, I hate to

break this moment too but we do really have to get out of here," he said.

Jessie nodded, standing still as James retrieved his sword, and let him lead her as he started after the lead of the dragon. Her vision danced and sparkled with a thousand points of white light at the exertion, stumbling slightly as the winged young man attempted to help her along the path. She stopped, holding onto her friend for support, but gradually losing the battle with gravity. "I feel terrible, like I've been drained of my energy completely," she muttered, suddenly recalling exactly how much she had used her psychic powers that day, "actually, maybe I have." She fell to her knees as a wave of dizziness overcame her, putting a hand to her forehead and James was instantly at her side, compassion evident in his every motion. "Jess?" he inquired, concerned as he stayed with her on the ground, "you okay?"

Jessie closed her eyes, making a mental check of her body's energy and power level, which had dropped dramatically after breaking her bonds and running. "I'm not that great yet, I used all my energy and power," she whispered ruefully. "Can you get up?" James asked. Jessie sighed and lifted her eyes to his, tacit communication passing between them. "I don't think so," she replied, settling involuntarily into James' arms again. "No, come on Jessie! We've got to get you out of here! You've got to get up!" he encouraged, assisting her futile efforts to stand. She slipped on the slick snowy white sand instead, and fell back into James' arms growling to herself in frustration. "Come on, try again, don't give up!" James pleaded as he futilely attempted to lift her again. She winced in pain and motioned for him to let her down, easing gently into his embrace.

"I won't give up, but I just don't have the strength! We have to find another way," she mused, lowering her eyes deviously at James. He saw the look of mischief behind the azure irises and smiled as he recalled the walk they had taken in the forest so long ago. "I know you can't weasel out of this one! I know you can pick me up," Jessie said with a smirk. "Yes, yes I can," James replied scooping her gently into his arms.

Jessie smiled as she wrapped her arms about James' neck, coiling her tail about his waist for stability as he lifted her thin figure with ease and turned back to the dragon at his feet. "So Draco, how do we get out of here?" he asked. Draco tossed his head over his shoulder, indicating to follow as he explained. "The river flows from outside, if we follow the current the opposite way, eventually we can trace it back to where you came in," he answered. James nodded in agreement, and silently followed the dragon's path.

They meandered along the shore of the black torrent, watching it steadily increase in velocity, spewing white foam against the shimmering black rock. The colors danced as they were caressed by the water and the pleasant sound of its rushing current echoed cryptically soothingly against the acoustic rock. If it hadn't been occupied by an evil demon, they would have thought the sea cave beautiful and harmonious. James sighed and looked down his friend to find her eyes shut, lips curled into a small smile with her still overjoyed persona and kissed her forehead tenderly as he realized she'd fallen deeply asleep in his arms.

Draco smiled at him and chuckled, wishing he could be there when

James finally told Jessie he was in love with her and turned back to the path, and nodded in approval as he noted the small point of light at the very bottom of a small wall of rock. "This is where I found you, this is where you came in, it's where you'll get out," he said motioning toward it.

James nodded and shook Jessie gently, waking her from her slumber. She blinked sleepily, her eyes searching for something to focus on, and panicked slightly, but relaxed when she felt herself still in James' arms, tightening her grip about his neck to force herself closer to him. "Hey Jess," James whispered tenderly, "think you can hold your breath for a while?"

Jessie opened her eyes fully at the statement, shaking her head to ensure she had heard correctly. James' serious tone and expression assured her he was genuine in wanting the knowledge. "Hold my breath? Why?" she asked. James didn't answer, but motioned to the flickering point of light that seemed miles below the surface of the water which meant freedom for them. Jessie gasped, but acknowledged what he was hinting to her and sighed. "Great," she groaned. "Yeah I know but it's the only way out of here," James answered. Jessie smiled at him reassuringly as he set her gently on the sand, letting her keep her arms around his neck for support, turning to Draco.

The little dragon smiled warmly, holding a claw up as he sensed what James was about to do. "There's no need to thank me James, it's really nothing!" he said closing his eyes happily. James chuckled and helped Jessie to the edge of the river, followed by their scaled companion. "Why don't you come with us Draco?" Jessie asked quietly. James brightened and nodded in agreement. "Yeah! You'd be a great addition to our little family, now that's complete again," James added squeezing Jessie's shoulders affectionately.

Draco sighed and hung his head. "My place is here, among my own kind, but perhaps someday we can meet again!" he suggested brightening. Jessie and James smiled. "I'd like that Draco, until then take care of yourself," James said reverently. "I will, and you two take care of each other," Draco replied deviously. "We will," Jessie said cheerfully, delighting James. He chuckled warmly, both at the kindness of the little dragon, and in rapture that Jessie said she wanted to take care of him and wanted him to take care of her, and turned back to the river.

Drawing in a deep breath, James edged slowly in, wincing as he felt his wings soak the water quickly. "Okay Jess, on the count of three, we'll go, and whatever you do don't let go of me," he said. "Right," Jessie answered nervously. They proceeded cautiously until the black water reached their chins, and the light was just visible directly in front of them. "Okay, one. Two. Three!" James cried, both of them inhaling deeply before disappearing below the surface.

Draco watched sadly as the streaks of red and blue disappeared, his stature drooping as he realized again his fate of never being able to leave Shadowrun. "Good luck together, my friends," he whispered mournfully and turned over his shoulder, walking back to the small nest he called home.

James closed his eyes against the black water, tightening his grip on Jessie apprehensively as he struggled toward where he knew the point of light was. He prayed silently that they could hold on, opening his

eyes to attempt to see. The black water was murky, and unforgiving against his vision, but he could vaguely discern the features of the passageway to the outside world. The light grew bigger, and brighter in magnitude, and James swam harder as he felt his body losing the battle with air swiftly.

Jessie felt her body grow weak with fatigue and lack of oxygen and power, and found she could no longer retain her grip on James, letting go listlessly. Her lungs forced an attempt for air, releasing what little they had left with the underwater gasp and filling with water. Jessie wrenched free from James as she fought to clear her choking throat, and James stopped the instant she slipped from his grasp, pressing his slowing wings into his body as far as they would go to swim after her.

Jessie let herself drift, her oxygen supply finally running out and allowing the water to claim it's former space. \_"If I can't make it, I hope James can,"\_ she thought as her mind clouded and knew no more, unconsciousness claiming her.

Though James' lungs screamed in pain for air, with one last forceful stroke he reached Jessie, knowing she was too weak to hold her breath as long as he could, and there was little time left for her if he couldn't get to the surface quickly. Catching her by the waist, he began along the path again, his heart racing and using precious oxygen as he watched the light spread until a tangible surface was visible.

It glimmered cordially at him as James used the last of his strength to break the surface, gasping for air with a rush of sound into his slightly debilitated ears and spray of water that caught the light of the waning sun. His attention immediately turning to Jessie, he raised her above the water but realized the urgency when he noted she was no longer breathing. "James! You made it!" he heard the excited voice of Jasper cry out as he hauled Jessie's lifeless form onto the bank of the river.

He laid her down gently on her back, smoothing her hair away from her face affectionately as he heard Jasper clamber down the small cliff to join him. "Jessie? Can you hear me?" James pleaded slipping two fingers beneath her chin. He exhaled in relief as he found a pulse, but breath still didn't come for his red-haired friend. "Jessie!" Jasper breathed, "she is alive! You were right James!" James nodded silently and contemplated what to do.

He'd been trained in emergency procedures while still in Team Rocket, but he found himself with only one option. Hoping Jessie wouldn't awaken and take it the wrong way, he bent down, pinching her nose shut as he pressed his lips to hers. Jasper looked on in horror as she remained inert, and put a hand to his chest apprehensively. "Come on Jess!" James encouraged, "breathe!"

He bent down again, but as soon as his lips touched hers, she lurched forward, hacking the water from her lungs loudly. "Jessie!" James exclaimed, catching her as she fell backwards. She spit the rest of the water from her mouth and opened her eyes, looking up to James lovingly. "James, I-" she trailed off, almost ashamed of what to say. James' heart skipped a beat as he leaned closer to her. "What is it Jessie?" he asked quietly.

She closed her eyes, wrapping her arms about James' neck as he helped her sit up. "Please tell me," he pleaded. "II," she stammered weakly. James held her tenderly, awaiting what she was about to tell him eagerly. "You can tell me anything," he assured her, stroking the back of her head. She pulled slightly away from his embrace, gazing into his eyes longingly. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

## 10. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 10: Crystal Reflections

### Chapter 10: Crystal Reflections

James held Jessie gently as the color slowly returned to her pallid face, rocking her and stroking her hair gently. "God I just want to be home," she muttered. "I know Jess, as soon as my wings dry I'll take you back as soon as possible," James assured her. Jasper smiled and eased himself into Jessie's arms gingerly, embracing her as tightly as he could. "I'm so glad you're okay Jessie!" he said happily.

Jessie smiled warmly, feeling better as she ruffled his ebony hair affectionately. "Hey Jasper, and I'm grateful to be alright too," she answered. "I missed you," James added and Jessie squeezed his hand reassuringly. "I helped him! I helped him be strong to find you!" Jasper piped fervently and Jessie smiled. "Did you need the help of a little boy?" she asked deviously. "I didn't think I could do it, but Jasper reminded me of what you told me, but what I didn't believe until now," James answered.

Jessie ran a hand through James' hair affectionately, resting her cheek against his. "You'll always be my hero James," she said, tears falling again. "And you're the wind beneath my wings," he remarked with a smirk. "That sounds a little familiar," Jessie said wiping the tears of happiness from her cheeks. "Yeah well I couldn't resist," James chuckled, spreading his wings farther into the last rays of the sun.

They'd developed a slightly waterproof covering they hadn't had before, as the feathers had been young and new, but now all that remained of the terrifying experience underwater, was the soaked clothing and hair. He shook the last droplets of water out of the great blue lengths and folded the now dry feathers back in respectively. "Ready to go home?" James asked. Jessie smiled and nodded vigorously, but her brow furrowed as she remembered the boy that still rested in her arms. "But what about Jasper?" she asked.

James bit his lip, as he hadn't thought about it before, and knew he wasn't strong enough to carry both of them, but Jasper sensed the apprehension in James' silence, and stood up, backing away from the duo still on the riverbank. "It's okay James, I'll just stay here, Grandma can take care of me until you come back," Jasper promised. James felt a pang of hurt, but gathered Jessie into his arms as he stood, smiling warmly at his young friend. "And I will come back for you," he assured him and spread his wings lightly.

"I can make it back from here, you take Jessie home and stay there, I'll join you sooner or later, and I'm sure you have a lot you need

to talk about," Jasper said, a furtive wink catching only James' eye. He nodded one last time, and gently lifted himself into the air, feeling Jessie tense in fear. "It's okay Jess, calm down and enjoy the trip!" he cried, overjoyed to take to the skies again.

He looked down to see Jasper wave fondly at him before he disappeared from view below the small cliff above the riverbed, and turned his eyes back to the now midnight blue horizon. "We'll be home soon Jess, but we have to make a small stop first," James said, grinning deviously. "Huh? Small stop where?" Jessie asked. "You'll see when we get there," Jessie was forced to be satisfied with the response, and settled into James' arms to watch the scenery rush below her.

James flew harder after what seemed like days as he spotted the spires of Vertigo palace, and the very familiar hill below him. "Hold on Jess, here's where we make our stop," he announced, dropping slightly. Jessie tightened her grip about his neck as he gently lighted at the base of a small hill, and gasped at what she saw.

There were still bits of armor, weapons, and even a few horses still scattered about the field, and Jessie felt terror seize her as she realized she'd been taken to where Rill had killed her months before. "James why the hell did-" he cut her off with a finger to her lips. "I didn't come here to show you this, follow me," he answered, taking her hand. She blinked in confusion as he led her up the hill, stopping just before the crest and what she saw nearly brought tears to her eyes.

James smiled as her hands flew to her mouth, stepping cautiously forward towards what he had intended for her to see. "Oh my god," she breathed, "did you do this?" She turned over her shoulder, casting her friend a baffled look and James joined her, and gasped in surprise to find a quite unexpected sight. Jessie's sword still stood erect in the soil, but the roses he had planted had grown, entwining themselves around the blade carefully. There was a single tiny red flower at the end of the thorn ridden vine, and it had bloomed right next to the eye symbol on the sword, and as James inspected it further, he discovered that the paper with his memorial poem had been unfurled completely. It was caught on a few coiling tendrils, and opened for all to see in front of the blade.

He smiled warmly, taking the hilt of the sword of the mind into his hand, and beckoned Jessie to join him. "I did it for you, in memory, but now that I have you back, the roses should be enough," he explained. Jessie choked back her tears, and took James' other hand as he gently eased her blade from the ground, letting the rosebush drop to a natural position with a soft rustling of leaves. He turned to her, and offered the sword, but was forced to rest it on the ground as Jessie threw her arms about him, embracing him tightly. "James you're the sweetest person I've ever known in my life, thank you," she whispered.

James felt his cheeks run crimson, but dropped the sword as he hugged his long lost friend back. "And you mean the world to me Jessie, it was nothing," he replied. "Think Ash and everyone else missed me?" Jessie asked pulling away slightly. "Jess, they really think you're gone forever! Of course they miss you!" James answered. Jessie chuckled as James slid her blade into the sheath that still hung at her side, and lifted her gently into his arms. "Home James," she

mused fondly. The winged young man shook his head at the old stereotype and spread his wings, lifting into the sky gently. "Not all chauffeurs are named James you know," he said with a smirk. "Just fly James." "Alright."

It didn't take them long to reach the palace after that, and James' heart warmed as he saw Jessie brighten. He landed gently in the courtyard in front of Misty's fountain, and allowed Jessie to slip from his arms gingerly, and was delighted to find she now had the strength to stand on her own accord. "How are we going to do this? I mean we can just waltz in saying Oh look! Jessie's alive!' you know," she said turning to her friend. "Why not? Sounds fine, they're probably up waiting for any sign of me anyway," he replied taking her hand. Jessie smiled broadly at the prospect of seeing her friends again and followed James into the palace.

Misty sighed as she ran a hand through Ash's hair who had long since fallen asleep with his head in her lap, looking up to Brock ruefully. He'd insisted upon staying up to wait for James, but as of yet there was no sign of him, and Brock nodded the affirmative to awaken their flaming friend. "I know he misses James, we all do, but he's going to make himself sick over it!" Misty whispered. "I know, I miss him too, but James is an adult, and he's fully capable of taking care of himself," Brock remarked. "Yeah, but James is the one who's convinced Jessie's still alive, he's insane, who knows what he's gotten himself into!"

James stopped, hearing his name from behind the door he had just passed, and pressed his ear against it, motioning for Jessie to remain silent and do the same. They grinned mischievously at each other and turned their attention back to the conversation inside of the room.

"God I miss Jessie so much, I loved her like a sister, I love everyone here like my siblings," Brock said, tears apparent in his voice. "Me too Brock, but when I think about her, I try to remember what little time we had as friends, and how close we'd gotten. I think about the better times, like when we used to have sleepovers in each other's rooms. We talked about everything together," Misty replied softly, which drew a fond chuckle from Brock. "Ah, girl stuff?" he asked. "Yeah basically, but neither of us had it before, and you, Ash, and James were often the centers of discussion," she answered.

Ash stirred at this, muttering something in his sleep and Misty stroked his cheek in comfort. "He really feels responsible for all of this," she whispered solemnly. "Well, it was Jessie's choice to sacrifice herself for James, she chose her path, and I guess James' life meant more to her than her own," Brock said, wringing his rough hands together with a grating of stone. "James meant the world and more to her, she told me, we all meant so much to her, she said once we were the only family she'd ever had," Misty moaned tearfully.

"Oh, Jessie you really said that?" James whispered taking his ear from the cool, lacquered wood of the door. Jessie colored and looked away, nodding furtively but was forced to look back at James' tender touch on her shoulder. "It's really time for you to come back to all of us, we need our family complete again," he said. Jessie smiled, taking his hand into her claws, reveling in its familiar warmth and



tenderness, and motioned toward the room with her head. "You first," she whispered. James drew in a shaky breath, tuning his eyes to the door and, leaving his other hand in Jessie's, turned the knob slowly.

Misty and Brock jumped as the creak of the ancient hinges on the door resounded loudly as it slowly slid open, revealing a distraught and disheveled looking James. "Oh my god, James you're back!" Misty cried, gently easing Ash out of her lap. He awoke at the sudden movement, his flames and tail flaring with a yawn and sudden intake of oxygen and blinked sleepily. His eyes searched half-blindly, finding Misty, and watched as she stopped instantly in front of the door, hands over her mouth in shock. "James! I-OhI-It isn't!" she stammered.

Ash sat up as Misty collapsed with an unnatural thud to the ground, shaking her head in utter disbelief and her hand still clasped over her mouth with her tears. "It can't be!" she breathed. The sudden transition from near silence awakened the two Pokemon who had been huddled together near the window, Pikachu curled into a tight ball against Meowth's side, and they looked up sleepily to survey the room. "What on earth is" Meowth trailed off as saw the duo in the doorway, and instantly leapt from his perch, rushing forward with a bound into Jessie's arms, opening the door to reveal the emotional reunion to Ash.

"Jessie! It's you, it's really you!" the cat sobbed as Ash sat bolt upright on the chair he'd shared with Misty. He said nothing as Misty laughed joyously through her tears, embracing James lovingly before falling to her knees, taking Jessie and Meowth with her. Brock and Pikachu joined soon after, along with James, all of them falling into one sobbing, overjoyed mass on the floor and Ash smiled as he stood slowly.

He put a hand to his chest as he realized that James had been right all along, Jessie was alive, and he'd managed to rescue her. He felt a sense of closure at seeing her again, and the familiar feeling of closeness and family ties he always felt when the seven messengers were together. Life had seemed empty without her, and it had even seemed James was gone he had been so depressed and grief-stricken at her death. He let his tears fall, silently watching and listening to the group welcome Jessie back with open arms and hearts not wanting to break the euphoria.

He let his threatening tears fall unabashed, and Jessie looked up, smiled warmly at him, and stood, stepping over to him. "Jessie?" he ventured at length. She wiped the tears tenderly from his cheeks, and folded him into a tight embrace, letting him sob loudly onto her shoulder. "Oh Ash, don't cry like that," she whispered stroking the back of his flaming hair. "I missed you so much, and it was all my fault!" he cried. "No! No it was not your fault!" she snapped pulling him away to look into his eyes, "I risked my life to save James, that was my choice." Ash fought back another outbreak, and swallowed hard, staring hard into Jessie's azure eyes. "I'm so glad you didn't lose it!" he cried throwing his arms around her neck again.

James wiped his own tears from his eyes, listening to Ash and Jessie's sobs abate, and smiled, eagerly awaiting when he could confess his deep love for her. "Jessie, you must be exhausted!" Ash said, sniffing, "Actually, I am, I used all of my power escaping, but

a day's sleep should be enough," she replied, her eyes dropping as she remembered exactly how tired she was. James seized the opportunity, shoving Misty forward gently. "Misty why don't you help her to her room, I need to talk to Ash alone for a second," he announced.

Jessie raised an eyebrow at him as Misty helped her rise with extreme difficulty, and placed an arm about her shoulders for support. "Sure James, come on Jessie, need anything else?" Misty asked as she escorted the young woman out of the room. Meowth took the hint from James and cleared his throat. "Well all dat cryin' made Meowth thirsty, lets go get sumthin' eh?" he suggested and smiled when James nodded an affirmative to him. Brock and Pikachu silently agreed and left as well, closing the door with an echoing slam.

James immediately turned to Ash, helping him stand and wiping the last of his tears away. "W-What did you want to see me for?" he asked. "Ash, you're the only one I trusted with this, partially because you were the only one there and in their right mind in Vinetra's palace, but I trust you with it now," he explained, seating him in the chair he had occupied. The boy raised an eyebrow, an utterly bewildered and confused look distorting his young features. "What do you mean?" he asked, confused. "Ash, I'm going to tell her, tomorrow, when she wakes up," James replied, his emerald eyes sparkling with adoration.

Ash set his jaw, smiling weakly, but remembered the morning long ago when he'd spoken with Jessie in the courtyard and she had instructed him not to let James fall in love with her. "You're going to tell Jessie you love her?" he asked with difficulty. "Yes I am, I can't deny my heart anymore, and I can't keep my feelings bottled up for much longer. Even if she doesn't love me back, I have to tell her, because I love her more than anything else in the world, and I'll go insane if I don't!" he said reverently, "besides, I don't want to lose her again, not without telling her. If I lost her forever, I don't know what I'd do."

Ash swallowed hard at hearing his friend's words, his heart beating in the backs of his ears. Though he knew Jessie didn't love James as he did her, perhaps she had been rash in saying it, and James could coax a love from her with his. He could only hope for the best, and be there for James should he get his heart broken to mend perhaps more than his soul, but his friendship as well. He looked up into the young man's eyes and smiled reassuringly. "Good luck James, I know you can be happy together," he said firmly. James nodded, patting his young friend on the back, and went for a pen and paper to begin his plan.

He carefully scripted a short letter, and the next day, picked the reddest, most perfect rose he could find from Cerise's personal garden, and knowing Jessie was in too deep of a sleep to awaken, entered her room quietly early that same day, the evening after he told Ash of his plans to confess his love. Jasper had not yet returned to boost his confidence, and he had alerted his friends that he would be coming back, but this time James felt confident in his own abilities to tell her.

Her chamber was decorated with the same kind of symbols and adornments that made up the blade of the mind, which glinted cordially at him from it's spot draped across the back of a chair in

the corner of the room. The tall candelabras composed of elegantly twisted metal still held the brand new thick, yellowed wax candles Jessie had put in before she had been captured, and were untouched just as the group had left her room the months Jessie had been gone. James fingered the nearest one, the cold smooth metal pleasing under his fingers and finally reached Jessie's bedside.

She slept peacefully on her stomach beneath the silken purple sheets and canopy above it, one hand on the pillow in front of her face, her chest rising and falling slowly with the pleasant bliss of long neglected and deserved sleep. She looked powerful when she slept, all personal flaws, fears, desires, hopes and dreams fell away and melded into one human being, all blending to form a balanced equilibrium. She looked like her Arbok, a deadly but beautiful force to be reckoned with, apt to strike at any given moment and he sighed wistfully as he sat next to her still form, listening to her soft breathing, and smiling warmly at her innocent expression of a pleasant dream. "Someday, I'll wake up next to you Jessie, and everyday I'll remind you exactly how much I respect you, and love you," he whispered, carefully removing the last of the thorns from his rose.

He kissed the petals softly, and gingerly eased the stem into her deceivingly deadly claws. She muttered something quietly under her breath in her sleep and stirred, her tail twitching softly, betraying its location beneath the covers. James took the opportunity, slipping his note beneath the rose in Jessie's claw, gently running his hand over the smooth enamel, and to the soft skin of the back of her hand. "Sleep well Jess," he whispered, kissing her forehead gently, and stood.

James looked one last time to his beloved's sleeping form, and turned over his shoulder, exiting noiselessly. He shut the door as quietly as possible, and pressed his back against the flush wood, spreading his wings slightly to allow his back to touch it. "Well James, it's now or never," he muttered and mechanically made his way into the courtyard to wait for Jessie to awaken and read the letter.

—

My Dearest Jessie,

As soon as you read this, if you feel strong enough, please come meet me at Misty's fountain in the courtyard. There's something I've been meaning to tell you for a long time, and in light of this near tragedy, I feel I must talk to you about it. It's the right time to take us into account and I desperately need to put my mind to rest.

James

—

James tensed as he recalled the words of his letter he had memorized, hoping he hadn't given her too much of a frightening clue as to what he meant to discuss, and paced the length of the illuminated fountain nervously. The bottom shone and reflected the double moons' light with a gorgeous stone, casting eerie light blue webs upon James' face and the scenery about him. He turned his back to the castle, bending down to examine the variety of tiny fish Misty kept in her small

sanctuary.

The young mermaid had somewhat claimed it as hers, often going into Vertigo and buying assortments of brightly colored fish and other water oddities to add to it. The fountain was certainly large enough, and Misty had turned it into a beautiful menagerie and a fitting tribute to her love of the sea. James closed his eyes as he listened to the soft rustling of the trees in the night breeze, and the gentle trickle of the soft currents of clear water, hoping to hear Jessie's voice call his name lovingly.

"James? What is this all about?" he smiled broadly at Jessie's, contrary to what he had hoped, confused call and turned around to meet her. "Hey Jess, feeling better?" he asked brightly as she joined him by the fountain. "Hell yeah! I feel like my old self again! But now you write me this, and to be honest I'm a little scared of what you're about to tell me," she said warily. James contained his overwhelming emotion and beckoned her to follow his example. "Sit down Jessie," he replied simply, taking a seat on the wide rim of the fountain.

Jessie sat beside him, and James felt his heart soar as he spotted the rose he had given her tightly gripped in her hand. Perhaps it was a sign she felt for him after all! "What did you want to talk about?" she asked nervously, and gasped when James took her hands tenderly into his, terror suddenly gripping her as she looked into his hopeful emerald eyes. "We've known each other a long time, haven't we?" he began, directing his eyes to the stars. "We certainly have, and we've gone through so much," Jessie replied relaxing. "And through our trials, I've felt closer and closer to you every single time, but this one with Shadowrun really pulled the trigger for me, and I've been forced to deal with overwhelming emotions that I can't hide anymore," James continued. "I don't like where this is going James," Jessie whispered apprehensively.

James felt a wave of remorse, but forced the words aside, ignoring the comment lest he discover what he knew the answer would be before he could tell her fully the extent of his love. "I've wanted to tell you how I felt about you for so long, but I couldn't. Tonight though, I feel I can, and I feel confident, thanks to you and Jasper, to tell you that Jessie, you are my everything. You mean more to me than anything else in the world, and I'd do anything to make you as happy as you make me," he paused, watching Jessie's expression change from confusion to utter remorse and terror.

"And I don't give a damn if you don't feel the same way, I just need you to know how strongly I feel for you, that I always have, and that I lo-" "Shut up James," Jessie snapped, snatching her hands away and glaring daggers at the winged young man. James took the words like a blow to the face, banishing his tears quickly and forcing himself to go on. "I understand completely if you don't feel the same way," he ventured cautiously, "but I had to tell you. I can't deny my heart anymore." "James I don't love you, you're just wasting your affection, please stop, you're just going to hurt yourself," Jessie spat bitterly.

James remained silent, directing his eyes toward the ground with the utter humiliation and disappointment ripping his consciousness in angst. He felt betrayed, and cheated, his quest for love and fulfillment of his soul, shattering and crumbling to worthless dust

as he watched. "Please, don't say anything more, just tell me why," he choked, looking up to her with tearful eyes.

Jessie scowled at him, and was forced to look away from his completely annihilated and emotionally mutilated expression. "I-I can't. Just go James, I don't want to hurt you anymore, I've done enough," she hissed through clenched teeth. "I'm not leaving until we talk this over! Come on Jess, at least as my best friend, we can reason," he pleaded, taking her hands again.

"Stop it!" she roared in frustration, tears streaming down her face as she wrenched her hands free, slapping James hard across the face. He let his jaw drop in horror, placing a hand to his wounded heart, pride, soul, and only mildly stinging skin. "Jessie I-" "You just don't get it do you?! I don't love you! Hell I don't even want to love you! And when you finally get it through your thick skull, perhaps you'll stop making people hurt you! So just God damn it just leave me the hell alone!" she screeched, burying her face into her hands as she ran from the fountain.

James was helpless to do anything but watch as she fled from him, careening back into the palace, loud sobbing echoing against the bare stone that composed the walls, as a mournful wind whistled through the unseen cracks in the structure of the palace, fulfilling the sense of abandonment and betrayal.

James stood slowly, his eyes directed toward the window of Jessie's room, where he watched it illuminate with the bright purple flames she was able to create that provided light, but no heat, his love undaunted. He felt the hot tears run down his cheeks as he spotted a crushed rose petal a few feet away and turned his gaze spitefully from the unwelcome sight. "Vous avez fendu mon coeur mon malicieuse cherie, mais je t'aime," he whispered longingly, "je t'aime."

Jessie flung herself onto her bed, sobbing bitterly and pounded her fist into her pillow furiously. "It's not fair! I always have hurt the people I love the most! But if I let them get too close I'll lose them! I always lose them, and I can't lose James, I absolutely can't! He means too much to me! But I care about him so much and I had to break his heart!" she wailed. She knew in her heart that she could never love James openly, even though she had for many years, for she knew that she would lose him as soon as she admitted it.

Her mother had been the first, and Jessie had adored her with all her body, soul and heart, only to have her taken away at only a tender seven years of age. She had been reluctant to love after that, but there had been a boy who had swept her off her feet, only to abandon her when she needed him most. Through all her trials with love however, Jessie's sobs abated as she realized that throughout her entire life filled with trials, tribulations, and heartbreaks, there had been one person who had been by her side for everything, and that had been the person she had just destroyed.

She had cried on James' shoulder when she finally admitted to him her mother was gone, and he had comforted her, and it was James who held her until she came to terms with it and herself. James had insulted and made fun her old boyfriend with her after they'd had a painful breakup, it was James who had wiped her tears away, and assured her she was much too good for an awful guy like that. He'd seen her in

her worst moments, tolerated every bit of spite and violence she and ever shown toward him, even welcoming her back with open arms after she had stolen from him and not once had she ever doubted he would leave her.

James had always come back to her, even when he could have stayed with his family and achieved their lifelong dream of being rich, and living in luxury, and Jessie sat up suddenly as she realized why he had never left her, and why he never would, realizing then she still clutched the rose he had given her tightly in her claws. "Oh god, he knows, and he loves me! Oh my god, my James loves me back!" she cried happily, finally embracing the love she had denied for so long.

She leapt from her bed, wiping her now tears of joy from her eyes, laughing in exuberance and speeding toward one target to finally admit to the one she loved that she had been wrong. He had proved many times over to her that he would never purposely betray or hurt her in any way, and James was the kindest, gentlest, most caring man she had ever known in her life. She knew she could trust him with her heart, and though she had tried to deny it for years, had wanted to give it to him and hadn't for far too long.

James curled into the smallest area possible atop the cool, smooth white sheets of his bed, crying as hard as he would allow himself. "I should have known she'd reject me!" he sobbed, "she'd never want to love someone like me, not when she can have anyone she wants, and she can. I never should have loved her in the first place."

James felt the utter remorse sharply and painfully in his mind, as he had always thought of himself and Jessie as meant to be, and soul mates. He was always able to see the good things they brought out in each other, and even through her staged callous act, he always knew she cared about him. Of course she had her moments, and James had often guilefully hidden the pain she caused him on occasion, but they had always managed to reaffirm their relationship.

James had realized the feelings he had always harbored for Jessie were love when he was faced with the concept of his own death, and had evaluated his life. He knew then that someday he would have to tell her, and also that she would more than likely hurt him deeply again, but the feelings had become so intense after rescuing her from Shadow, that he risked his heart and gotten it utterly annihilated.

"I can't believe I did that, how stupid can I get?" he muttered bitterly, furiously pushing his shoulder-length hair out of his face. He sat up on his bed slightly, propping himself on his elbows and sighed, wishing Jasper was there to offer a kind word as he usually did. \_"She'll probably never want to talk to me again,"\_ he thought to himself, running a finger down the hot side of his cheek where the blood still remained raised from Jessie's spiteful strike.

He missed her friendship already, her inexorably harsh and malicious words still ringing in his ears, still see her hard set and furious scowl. "I'm so sorry Jess, I'm so sorry," he whispered burying his face in his hands.

He was forced to look up, however, as a gentle knock sounded at his door, to which he snarled and threw himself back down on his bed. "Go away!" he snapped, not caring who or what it was. There was a brief

cessation of all sound before James barely heard the door creak open slightly. "James? Can we please talk?" James sat bolt upright as he heard Jessie's tender voice from the doorway.

To his utter astonishment, she smiled vaguely at him, closing the door behind her before sitting on the bed opposite him. "What do you want?" James asked, crossing his arms angrily over his chest. "I came to talk to you, and to say one more thing," Jessie whispered, closing her eyes as she leaned forward. James' reeled back in shock as he felt her lips brush against his briefly, pushing her away before she could kiss him.

Jessie's expression shifted to one of hurt, and she looked into his eyes with regretful and remorseful sincerity. "What the hell are you trying to pull Jessie?" James demanded, his voice laced with tears. "I just realized that I always had everything I ever wanted to love right by my side all along, and I was an idiot for trying to convince myself I didn't feel how I did, and how I do now," she answered cupping James chin in her hand.

He closed his eyes, clenching his teeth and looking away, tears sliding silently from under his eyelids. "Jessie I don't understand, first you tell me you don't love me, and don't want to even, and now you waltz in here just minutes after and try to kiss me? What's going on?" he hissed through clenched teeth. "James, I'm so glad you finally mustered the courage to try and tell me how you feel, or I guess felt now, because it made me think, and I realized that I felt the same way all along," she answered. "But Jessie you said you didn't! You said. You said you didn't want to," James added sorrowfully.

Jessie cursed herself under her breath for saying that to him, and hurting him with her cruel words, pulling her friend into a tight embrace. "James can't you see? I did believe that! I really didn't want to! Because I care about you more than anything and I Damn it, James! The mere thought of losing you makes me feel empty inside! I always lose the things I love, and I don't want to lose you!" she whispered, "I've tried to deny my feelings for you for years! Years! I did it because I felt that if I told you how I felt, you'd leave me somehow. But like someone very dear to me said once, I can't deny my heart anymore."

James hugged his friend back, sobbing in joy and finally understanding why she had said the things she did, letting his tears of pure ecstasy and elation run harder as he realized she did in fact love him as much as he loved her. "Tell me again James," Jessie whispered in his ear. "I love you Jessie, and I promise you you'll never lose me," he said. "I love you too, James, and I believe you," Jessie answered as she felt James kiss her cheek tenderly.

She turned her head to meet his lips, closing her eyes in joy as he kissed back with as much passion as he could muster. Jessie held James as close to her as she possibly could, the kiss deepening in passion, but breaking away only when she felt she had to speak to him more. "I'm so sorry James, I'm so sorry! I always hurt you so badly," she whispered, embracing him tightly. James ran his hands through her crimson mane, kissing her lips again tenderly. "I don't need an apology Jess. All I need is you," he replied.

Jessie closed her eyes, satisfied with James' reassurance, laughing

lightly in joy before kissing him again deeply as he pulled her into a loving embrace next to him on the bed. "I love you so much, and I feel like we've been in love for years," she breathed fondly. "So do I, but I guess we have, even though we never knew it," James answered. "I never loved anyone as much as you James, I hope you believe me after what I said to you," Jessie said, lying down alongside James as he did so. "I know why you did, and I believe you, and I love you Jessie, truly and unconditionally," he answered, finally putting all of Jessie's suspicions to rest.

She knew that she could trust him with her heart, but it seemed to her like they should sanctify the act, and be able to trust each other with their whole life being: heart, mind, soul, and body. She wanted to be as close to James as possible, mentally and physically, pulling herself closer to him with a content smile. She closed her eyes lovingly as she felt James' affectionate nuzzle into her neck, kissing him passionately on the lips once more as she reached to his chest, undoing the thin lacing of his shirt. "I need you James, I want to be close to you, do you trust me?" she asked softly as she felt him reply by unclasping the buckle of the tanned leather belt she normally wore. "Of course I do, the question is do you have faith in me?" "More than anyone I've ever known in my life."

James stopped as soon as he felt the leather slide out of the metal, opening his eyes and coloring slightly, Jessie mirroring the act in bewilderment. "Don't stop now," she whispered soothingly. "I-I'm sorry Jessie, it's just that I've never-" Jessie silenced him with a gentle finger across his lips. "Just go with it James, neither have I," she answered, pulling her belt completely away from her suede pants and James' grasp, "I trust you with everything, and I want to share everything with you." She let James pull her closer into his body, his hands moving up her back and carrying her tunic with them. "Enough to make love to me?" he asked quietly. "I want to make love to you James," she whispered, knowing he would feel the same way.

His eyes sparkled as he accepted her invitation, allowing her to remove his soft white shirt tenderly, the fact that Jessie was willing to share the bond of extreme closeness and sanctifying their pledge of each other's souls to one another, was proof enough that she loved him for who he was, and it would always be that way. Everything else faded away into oblivion as James welcomed Jessie's tender touch as she undressed him, and he did the same for her, continually kissing her softly, welcoming her ardent affection back, and reveling in each blissful moment.

James watched as he saw the pure and raw emotion that Jessie was capable of, and all the passion and love she had saved for the right person, shone through with a brilliant light, their souls becoming one as their bodies did. It amazed him to see the sarcastic, indurate act crumble away at his touch and in his arms, caressing her beautiful body tenderly, and welcoming her own intimacy and embrace, whispering her name in pleasure and adoration.

Jessie murmured her love's name softly in reply with each gentle thrust, and marveled at what she had finally found in James, her partner, her best friend, and now her soul mate and lover, vowing to never mistrust her heart again. The winged young man was implausibly gentle and passionate, true to his nature, as if he feared hurting her, and it beautifully reminded the psychic messenger of why she



loved her old friend so much, and why he completed her soul so well. Jessie held him tightly to her body as their love reached a zenith, living and knowing nothing but James. He became her world, like nothing beyond the bed they shared and their love existed, and everything else was obsolete as she gave herself to him fully with the mutual knowledge that they both desired to spend the rest of their lives together, and they had sealed the promise with their physical act of devotion and love.

Both Jessie and James experienced all at once the sovereign dynamism of the sentiments they had withstood their entire lives together; the sting of defeat, sorrow, heartbreak, exuberance, and bliss, their hearts bursting as they finally felt indivisibly close for eons to come. James could even feel the rewards from his quest of the heart, mind, soul, and body, exploding in both of their minds with a brilliant eruption of triumph of the heart, and the fulfillment of both a prophecy and two insignificant lives so deeply entwined in it. At length, it was over, and they settled into each other's arms pleasantly exhausted. James lay awake, however, listening to Jessie's labored breathing slow to the level of sleep and gently smoothed her tousled crimson hair away from her forehead.

He lay awake long after she had fallen asleep, holding her close, thinking and savoring the feeling of what they had shared and done. James finally felt complete, and smiled adoringly at seeing the small grin on Jessie's sleeping lips, kissing her forehead gently, and closing his eyes fondly to sleep as well, knowing that he would awaken next to his beloved for the first time, just as he had imagined for so long.

James drifted off to sleep with the pleasant and fulfilling knowledge that he had finally found the one woman he knew he was destined to be with, and she felt the same way about him. He finally felt truly happy and not at all shocked that his true love had been the one person who had stayed with him, the little girl he had made instant friends with in school. She was the teenager he had joined Team Rocket with, the same one who had chased after Pikachu and failed so many times with. Then she became the young woman who held his hand during harsh lectures from Giovanni, cried with him when she had discovered the scars on his back from his childhood, expertly bandaged his near fatal wounds in the prison cell, held his hand when he thought he might die, refused to let him go because she loved him, and finally matured into the woman that James had given his heart to. Fate had kept them together for so long, and James, with help and unconditional love from Jessie, would make sure they were together forever after that.

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Rill smoothed back Shadow's slick ebony fur, checking the now healed wound in her ribcage, nodding to her that it was indeed completely restored. The feline stood weakly, shaking her head to clear her concentration blurred vision and groaned with the exertion. Once Rill was assured his master was back to health, he remembered what had happened and backed a few steps away, bowing his head in shame and respect. "I'm sorry master, but the girl got away," he muttered timidly. "She and her pathetic lover-boy have been quite a nuisance, haven't they? Ah what a fickle thing love can be. Not to worry, however, I do believe I have a solution that will let me have enough power to temporarily allow me enough time to bring her back and kill

her once and for all!" Shadow hissed, "and it will benefit you as well." Rill's icy blue eyes widened in anticipation of the reward from the powerful being, and he smiled crookedly. "Is there anything I can do to help master?" he asked anxiously. Shadow chuckled softly to herself, lowering her eyes seductively as she placed a paw on Rill's chest, finding his heartbeat quickly. "Close your eyes, and do try not to scream," she said, the wiry man disobeying her word as he felt her energy surge through him with a hum of electricity. Shadow's power sizzled and crackled about the air with a vengeance, and Rill's scream of agony and pain echoed and resounded throughout the entire distance of Shadowrun.

## 11. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Chapter 11: When Darkness Gives Way to Light

### Chapter 11: When Darkness Gives Way to Light

Jessie opened her eyes slowly as the gray light of early morning filtered through her closed lids and upon feeling James' gentle breath against her neck, smiled tenderly at him. She felt the warmth of his bare body still pressed close against hers, and his arms still wrapped adoringly about her shoulders. He looked so innocent and happy while he slept, and it filled Jessie's mind and soul with joy to know that it was her that brought him so much of the same. "I love you James, you're the most beautiful man in any world I've ever lived in," she whispered kissing his lips softly.

She had never imagined waking up next to him would make her as happy as it did, and she ran her hand through James' hair once as he stirred, as if she had awakened her sleeping prince with her previous kiss, nuzzling the bridge of his nose with her own affectionately. His eyes fluttered open, and Jessie watched as the emeralds sparkled with joy to find her still next to him. "Jessie." he breathed as if he didn't believe it was real. "Hey James," she replied. He smiled ecstatically at her quiet response, closing his eyes to kiss her lovingly. "I can't believe this is happening, I can't believe last night happened," he breathed joyfully, yet nervously.

Jessie placed a finger on James' lips to put his troubled mind to rest, shaking her head. "Shhh, don't worry, believe every amazing minute of it. Having regrets?" she asked caressing his cheek tenderly. "Of course not! I just. Do you think we made a mistake?" he asked fearfully. Jessie smirked crookedly at the respect he had for her, and how worried he was about what they had done, and if they had moved too fast and acted rashly. He had such a sensitive, beautiful, kind, gentle and caring soul, and Jessie loved him all the more for it. "James, last night was a promise. I slept with you, because I know I'm going to spend the rest of my life with you, and I love you. I promise I'll love you forever," she explained, knowing that her genuine and sincere words would console James, "it was like making love to an angel." James' eyes lit up at her happiness and security, and the reference to his wings in comparison to his nature, his mind finally made up, and he took her claws in his hands kissing the back of it gently.

Ever since he had realized he loved Jessie, he had known he would never want to be apart from her, even if it was just as his best

friend, but now that he knew she felt the same way, he was finally able to ask the one question that would make him eternally happy. "I love you James," Jessie murmured dreamily. "I always have, and I always will love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Marry me Jessie, I never want to be with anyone else," James said reverently.

Jessie felt tears of joy sting at the corners of her eyes, finally hearing the words from James' mouth she had only dreamed about hearing. "Of course I will," she whispered, closing her eyes and leaning forward to kiss him passionately. "I love you so much, Jessica LeBlanc," James said tearfully, kissing her tenderly again. Jessie let her own tears fall at hearing her future last name, simply embracing her fianc   tightly. "I love you too James," she whispered, kissing his neck softly.

A sudden and furious clap of thunder sounded outside startling both Jessie and James before their lips could meet once again, and Jessie sat bolt upright in bed, holding the white sheets to her chest apprehensively. "Jess what's wrong?!" James asked startled, sitting up with her. Jessie didn't answer, but looked to James' window instead, gasping at what she saw and felt from the ominous black haze spread across the land.

The skies were clouded completely over, and they moved with each other in a celestial battle, purple lightning rocketing from the impacts and striking random places of the landscape. "It's her, but how?" Jessie breathed, narrowing her eyes bitterly, watching the pair of brilliant purple eyes embedded in the clouds. James frowned, but his confusion suddenly turned to terror as his eyes met the malevolent gaze of the feline. "Shadow! But you're alive! How can she have the power to do this?" he asked fearfully.

Jessie felt the energy surge from the demon, beckoning her for the challenge, and snarled under her breath. \_"Jessie, you'll be mine once and for all," "Not on your life Shadow! I've finally found my true happiness, and you are not taking it away from me again!" "I won't touch your precious James, all I want is your power! But if it takes James to get to it, I suppose a few bumps along the road have to be hit." "No! Damn you to hell if you so much as touch my James! Leave him alone! I'm the one you want!" "Then come out and fight coward!"\_

Jessie's eyes flared a furious purple as she broke the connection with the monster, and quickly reached for her tunic, donning it quickly. "Jessie what's going on?" James asked. He was answered by a shroud of fabric in his arms as Jessie roughly handed him the white shirt of the previous day. "Get dressed, in your armor, and instruct everyone else to do the same. Meet me down in the courtyard when you're done and make sure everyone is armed," she said sternly.

James nodded dumbly as she slipped out of bed, instantly finding her pants and pulling them on. She located James' clothes and gathered them into her arms, turning to face him, but her face fell at his concerned expression. "What's wrong James?" Jessie asked tenderly. "I hope Jasper's okay," he whispered to her, accepting his garments as she held them out to him. "I hope so too, but I'm sure he's fine! He's just a little boy, he isn't mixed up in this, what would Shadow want with him?" she assured him, cupping his chin in her hand and

rubbing his cheek with her thumb. "I guess you're right, and I'll get everyone else as soon as I can!" James piped enthusiastically.

Jessie kissed him quickly as he finished dressing, smoothing his tangled hair lovingly. "I'll see you down in the courtyard," James said adjusting his wings. "As soon as I can," Jessie replied, "now go, and tell everyone it's of utmost importance. And don't tell them about last night, or that we're getting married just yet, we'll surprise them later, and I'll try my hardest to act like we're just friends before that okay?" "Okay Jess, but we will tell them we're lovers after we can finally love each other in peace," James replied grinning in anticipation. "Absolutely, now hurry up, I can feel Shadow's presence and power growing," Jessie said. James nodded the affirmative and took his flight, rushing from the room and closing the door behind him.

Jessie sighed, listening to his footsteps grow softer as she finished dressing, and turned a spiteful glare back to the entity in the black clouds. \_"This is it Jessica, to live or die, it's a choice someone's going to have to make,"\_ Shadow hissed. \_"No one is dying except for you!"\_ Jessie replied harshly and mentally. \_"I'm afraid you're quite mistaken, now who shall I take? Maybe one of your good friends? Ash? Misty? Or maybe your beloved James! Perhaps having him truthfully die in your arms will be enough for you to submit to me!"\_ "No! I told you god damn it! Leave my James and my friends out of this!" "I'll do whatever I have to, to get you and your power!" "Bring it on."\_

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Jessie broke off the psychic link with the sadistic feline, opening the closet she kept the armor of the mind, the same armor that her ancestor who had been the messenger of the mind had worn. She smiled at it, grateful Cerise had finally told everyone about the beautiful, protective, and symbolic cuirass she had not allowed them to have until after they had been miserably defeated by Rill. James had been reluctant to even see the outfit that would have belonged to Jessie, as he still thought her dead, but he had placed it in her memory in her room.

The elegantly crafted metal inlaid on the breastplate shimmered anxiously as she took it from the post, running her fingers over the symbol of the mind that would rest below the nape of her neck when she wore it. It was the center of a dizzying labyrinth of coiled, gold colored metal that was not only gorgeous, but could deflect many magic and physical assaults as well. It was accompanied by a short leather skirt, also inlaid with metal and bits of amethyst stone and a pair of knee height leather boots, also gold and amethyst encrusted which glittered brightly as Jessie armed herself with her new attire.

She breathed in deeply and walked to the window, smiling at the welcome sight of her friends waiting for her and gripped the hilt of her sword anxiously. \_"James I promise you, we will live happily ever after when we beat Shadow, there's nothing standing in our way after that. We'll get married, and spend the rest of our lives together, and I swear I'll make you as happy as you make me,"\_ she thought to herself, noting that the purple stone set into her sword was glowing brightly in anticipation, \_"let's go free ourselves at long last."\_ She drew in one last shaky breath and exited her room, making her way

down to the courtyard to meet her friends.

James turned as he heard Jessie's approaching footsteps, and grinned seductively, noting that she was wearing the armor emblazoned with her symbols. "You look great in that Jess," he whispered deviously. Jessie mirrored the amorous smirk as she brushed past James, assuming an air of authority, but whispering a scant message back, "so do you." "So what's dis all about anyways? James woke Meowth up from a great nap!" Meowth said, stretching.

Jessie turned around and raised an eyebrow to the innocently smiling James. "You didn't tell them?" she hissed quietly. "I thought I'd let you, you'll do it better than I would," James replied moving to stand next to her. Jessie resisted her urge to do something affectionate, as did James, and they both turned to the small group in front of them as the lighting intensified in the sky. "I'm guessing it has something to do with that freaky purple lighting huh?" Pikachu ventured, even his electric senses disturbed by the activity.

Jessie gritted her teeth, glaring up to the sky where only she could see the malevolent eyes of the beast and felt the hatred build in the atmosphere. "Shadow, the one who captured me, is here for a final showdown. She wants me, and only me but I am not going without a fight, and I hope you'll help me," Jessie said valiantly drawing her sword, "for the resistance, the seven messengers, our friendship, our love, our honorary brotherhood and sisterhood, and for our lives themselves, let us terminate this evil once and for all!" She raised her blade to the sky defiantly before pointing it toward her friends.

The rest of the group drew in a sharp breath in fear, not quite understanding the severity of the situation and looking to each other in vacillation. James frowned at them, unsure of why they were hesitating, and loudly drew the blade of the wind to meet Jessie's. She smiled in response, furtively taking his hand in hers, and caressing his tail with hers, reveling in the feeling of the silky blue feathers against the slick tan skin. "I'll defend us Jessie, and I doubt everyone else knows what they're up against, but I do, and I will fight and die by your side to protect us, I'll do anything necessary to keep my promise, even if it means we both have to die for it," he said forcefully meeting Jessie's eyes in a passionate stare that told her everything he would have preferred a kiss tell.

They gazed lovingly at each other until the clang of metal against metal resounded in the couple's ears, and they directed their eyes to their swords, which now had the blade of the flame atop them. "Ash," Jessie and James breathed simultaneously. "I'll help too! The messengers fight together, win together, cry together, they lose together, and they die together! I can sense what we're up against, but we are not going to lose! I swear it!" he replied, causing Misty and Brock to cast friendly glances to one another, drawing their blades assertively.

Both Jessie and James felt their hearts and spirits soar with exuberance as Meowth and Pikachu joined beneath the ring of swords, and they knew everyone felt the surge of power they created when they were together. The messengers were meant to be so eternally, and they all knew that no matter the circumstances, they would never allow any of them to be taken away again. Jessie's capture with the illusion of

death had taught them all just how much they meant to one another, and how much all seven of them were essential to saving Aradain, and to each other's spirits.

They could feel the power of the ancient legends and myths, the same ones that had pulled their ancestors into the legend, and brought them all to Periwinkle Village at the same time. They knew their place in it, and were more confident in themselves than ever before in the new world. They had forgotten their past, Team Rocket, Pokemon training, painful memories of families torn apart and emotional and literal scars, all born anew to face their greatest challenge of all, and for the two great messengers of the wind and mind, only one soul was depending on the victory against the evil demon of the shadows.

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\_"Well Jessica, you may have your little friends, but you will still perish! Mmm but wait, if I can have all of you, then my power will have the force of the seven powers behind it! There will be no stopping me!"\_ Jessie's eyes flared a deeper purple than they had ever been before with rage, answering Shadow's final taunt aggressively. \_"You can never beat the power of all seven of us combined!" "We'll just see about that."\_

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There was an utter stillness as Jessie felt the entity recede, gathering her power for her first and powerful strike. "Shit! Hold on guys, this is not going to be fun," she muttered, squeezing James' hand tighter and taking Ash's, who was immediately next to her. The rest of the group caught the young psychic's hint, linking their hands with a spark of energy that grew in magnitude with each grasp. Swords were re-sheathed, and the Pokemon were forced to cling to the nearest person's ankle, waiting in anticipation. "Hang on guys, close your eyes, focus on each other's power, and whatever you do, don't let go. You will let your wrists break and dislocate before you let go, and even then you won't, understood?" Jessie said with such authority, no one dared respond to it.

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\_"I love you James, and no matter what happens, we will always be together."\_ James smiled as he heard the message intended only for him, squeezing Jessie's hand reassuringly, his adoring emerald gaze returning the love Jessie had shown him through her mind. She smiled back, stroking James' hand tenderly with her thumb one last time, and closed her eyes, awaiting the initial strike.

The rest of the messengers' breath caught in their chest as all sound and movement suddenly stopped; the winds receded, the lighting rested, and the earth itself to hold its breath in waiting. No sounds dared to break the silence, and all present could feel the hair on the backs of their necks prickle as the powerful psychic energy began to coil its way toward them. \_"This is quite the poor place to die, why don't we go somewhere a little more fitting?"\_ Jessie bristled as she heard not Shadow's voice, but Rill's echoing through her mind, \_"I killed from you once, girl, I can do it again, and this time, I won't let James go." \_

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Jessie resisted her urge to scream as a brilliant purple bolt from the sky roared to earth, engulfing the small circle of friends in the haze and lifting their bodies from earth. They closed their eyes against the pain, and tightened their grip on each other's hands, for fear of being trapped in the void they found themselves eddying into. It spun mercilessly, carrying the seven souls through a vortex leading to what Jessie knew would be the greatest challenge of both hers, and James' life. \_"This spot should prove worthy, painful memories, the abundant presence of death, yes it should do quite nicely,"\_ Shadow mused for everyone to hear.

The group mutually sensed the ground below them, and braced themselves for the impact, and gritted their teeth against the icy wind that whipped their hair and clothing about their bodies. They hit the ground suddenly, but more gently than they had previously thought, with an unnatural thud, but that was the only sound that dared interrupt the steady shrieks and moans of the wind whipping across the landscape. James sat up carefully before the others, hearing the enraged and terrified messages being carried on the winds and embracing Jessie who sat up next to him. "Jess no!" he cried, tears springing to his eyes, "No! Not this! Anything but this!"

Jessie held her beloved close, quieting him and running her hand through his hair and feathers lovingly. "Shh James, what is it? What's wrong?" she asked fearfully. "Jessie this. This is where I held you, and. Jessie this is where you died!" he answered, banishing any further tears. Jessie gasped in terror as she felt the sorrow centered about the place in both James' heart and her own, and looked up to see the hill that had once bore her sword, the silhouette of her roses just barely visible. "That bitch! How dare she bring you here! I swear she dies when she shows her cowardly face!" Jessie hissed cruelly.

The rest of the messengers barely noticed the more affectionate as usual duo as they sat up, each gasping as they saw the black and tumultuous sky, riddled with furious bolts of purple lighting. They each sensed a powerful presence within it, and all around them, and they edged closer to each other for comfort. "Damn, the only time I've felt a presence like this was when I fought Ichtsique! Oh my god, you don't suppose?" Misty began fearfully.

Jessie pulled away from James as she felt Shadow approach, and reflected on what Misty had said, trying to remember anything about Shadow herself. She remembered a lithe black cat, with outrageously large ears and plain gold bangles about her legs. "Jessie, didn't Shadow wear a charm? And it had a symbol on it," James said, as if reading her thoughts. Jessie's jaw dropped in terror as a clear image of her oppressor came to mind, the gold disc with the symbol of the mind etched into it standing out against the ebony fur. She gasped in consternation as the knowledge finally percolated and cleared into her mind, hitting her psyche with unmitigated and omnipotent force to bitterly remind her that this was not going to be a simple battle. She cursed herself for not guessing it sooner, and tightened her grip on James fearfully. "It is her! James, Shadow is the power of the mind! That's what my scroll meant! It told me about Shadowrun, where Shadow was, and it pointed me to the power just like Misty's did!" she exclaimed victoriously.

The joy was to be short lived, as a particularly large and irate bolt of purple surged forth from the sky to land in front of the small group, startling them to demand their attention. \_"So you finally figured it out! I'm surprised you did it this fast! Humans are such a pathetic race, weak, and gullible, why, by showing Jessie James' death, I almost got her to submit to me! But this time, she will not escape!"\_ Shadow's disembodied voice rang out eerily above the crackle of electricity as it solidified into a living entity, with the vague shape of a black cat, flaring purple eyes standing out brilliantly against the jet black miasma of the body.

The feline laughed insidiously, rising from the ground as her power built, searching the terrified souls with her mind. She found Jessie's and smiled briefly, her mirth interrupted by the different presence surrounding it, her gleeful smile fading. "You've changed girl." She started, searching for what had caused the disturbing difference. Jessie held James tightly in fear, realizing what Shadow meant, and horrified at what she would do to her beloved when she discovered the problem. "NO!" Shadow roared, her eyes flashing nearly black with rage and Jessie swallowed hard; she knew now. "You've allowed yourself to be defiled! Your purity and innocence! All of it gone! Who would dare take it from me?" she growled, leveling her eyes at James.

"What?! What does she mean?" Misty asked, sensing what the other messengers were thinking. "Her soul has been tainted and weakened with love! She is no longer a virgin! No matter though, once her lover is out of the way, even in its marred state, her soul and his will be more than enough to get me into this realm!" Shadow hissed cruelly. Ash's brow furrowed in confusion, not knowing exactly what was going on, but his stomach twisted in consternation as James slowly stood from his spot next to Jessie, glaring daggers at the enormous cat in front of him. "I didn't defile her," he spat cruelly.

Shadow grinned in understanding, satisfied that her guileful plan to humiliate James in the process of forcing him to admit what they'd done had worked beautifully, laying her ears back at the bold messenger of the wind and the collective gasp of surprise and understanding from the rest of the messengers. She could not help but snicker as all eyes focused on James, wondering exactly what had happened, and why on earth he had slept with Jessie. "So it was you. Ah, and you don't think it's defilement? The human act of love, its so. Primitive and disgusting, I don't know how you do it!" Shadow said haughtily. "It's not disgusting! I love her, and I was willing to share everything with her! My heart, my soul, my mind, and my body!" he shouted.

Jessie sprang vivaciously from the ground at this, throwing herself into James' arms protectively and mirroring his hateful glare at Shadow. "I love him Shadow! And you're not taking him away from me or me away from him again!" she screamed defiantly. "They. They love each other? I never would have guessed, but I know they'll be happy together," Brock whispered to himself with a good-natured smile. "That's so beautiful! You tell her guys!" Misty jeered from the background. "I always knew it would happen!" Meowth added, his voice laced with tears of happiness for his old friends. "So did I, congratulations James, you did it," Ash breathed, overjoyed he had made Jessie realize how she really felt. James smiled at the comments



of not only acceptance, but joy and happiness from his compatriots, embracing his lover tightly as Shadow fell silent, the gold charm at her chest glowing a bright purple. "I end this now, this fight is between you two and me, you should not have involved the other messengers," she said, the purple glow expanding.

It grew into a gargantuan bubble over the earth, enveloping the two standing messengers and the black entity of Shadow, solidifying and running clear to form an impermeable barrier. The messengers made a mutual move to assist their friends, but before they could even rise to their feet the battleground was set, and there was no way in or out of it. "No! Jessie! James!" Ash cried leaping to his feet and resting his hands against the glass-like spell. The duo turned and smiled warmly one last time at their friends before engaging in the private battle between them, and the monster that threatened their happiness one last time.

They let go of each other, drawing their swords menacingly at the black beast before them. "Whatever happens, I'll always love you," James said, never taking his eyes from Shadow. "And I'll always love you, but we're going to win," she replied. Shadow smirked, her stature dropping until she materialized into the solid easily distinguishable cat form both messengers knew from before and raised a paw decisively. "Think whatever you like, but I have the trump card this time!" she said, flicking her wrist downward.

A small glitter of purple shot to the ground with the action, materializing into the form of an eerily familiar little boy. He sat up immediately, searching with wide emerald eyes for anything familiar, but only when he found it did the full severity of his identity strike the terrified duo at the mercy of the cruel entity. He brushed a strand of unkempt, shoulder length ebony hair from his face, and upon seeing Jessie and James, let his jaw drop in horror. James recognized the child instantly, his stomach twisting in terror and shock as he pulled away from Jessie to run after him. "No! Jasper!" he cried, reaching out. "James!" the boy replied lifting his hand to meet James', but a flash of silver stopped both Jasper and James dead in their tracks.

"You want your precious boy back, you fight me first. I do believe we have an old score to settle," James bristled at the voice and raised a spiteful glare into the cold and heartless ice gray eyes of Rill once again. The demon stood between his beloved Jasper and himself, blade of the alliance drawn and rested on the ground parallel to him. "Rill," James hissed derisively. The former alliance captain wore a confident smirk, and James lifted his sword slowly to the challenge, Shadow's insidious laughter penetrating to the depths of all of good heart present. "I brought along a little friend for you to play with!" she cackled. James barely heard her through his bitter glare into the lifeless and demonic eyes of Rill. They seemed different to him, as if they no longer had a living being behind them and they were pure advocates of the demon. "I swore I'd get my revenge you heartless bastard, I didn't want to kill you, but if that's what it takes so be it," James growled.

Rill batted the tip of James' sword playfully, remembering the last time they had fought, and knowing that this time, James would fight with his full abilities which were far above his own. "You're better than me James, we both know it, but in return for my soul, which gave Shadow the power to come here, I got a lovely compensation for it,"

he said smugly. Jessie and James finally understood how the beast had arrived outside of Shadowrun, and Jessie sprang forward, raising her sword to assist James.

Rill shot her a foul look from the corners of his vision, extending his hand toward her calmly as his narrow eyes flashed purple briefly and dully. "James!" she cried as her body halted of its own accord, freezing to the spot as if time itself had stopped. She found she could still speak, and lifted her eyes balefully to a shocked James. "Now that's just not cricket, this fight is between James, and me, no outsiders," Rill said cruelly. "James be careful! I can't lose you now!" Jessie called to him as Rill assumed a defensive position. "Don't worry Jess, I can take this guy," he replied. "Oh you can, can you? Well how do you think you'd do matched with powers exactly of your own?" he asked in response.

James said nothing, not quite understanding what his adversary meant, and gasped in terror as Rill's eyes flushed purple. "When I submitted my soul to Shadow, she gave me a power to finally kill you with," he started, and James noticed his voice wavering, and beginning to change, "would you like a taste of real power James?" The winged messenger stepped back as he heard his own name called in his own voice, and watched as Rill's stature rose slightly to meet his height.

All present watched in terror as the entity before them seemed to lose all tangible form, his body mutating into one that was not his own. His normally short sandy hair grew and flushed a brilliant cerulean, a pair of wings and a tail the matching color erupting from the now glittering gold and clear crystal encrusted armor that replaced the old alliance garb. Rill cackled mercilessly as James' emerald eyes traveled in terror up his scarred hand which held a transformed blade of the wind, and up to his now youthful face, opening his own eyes to stare into the ones that matched his. "Impossible," James breathed raising the blade of the wind and shaking his head in disbelief. "Believe it James, think you have the skill to beat your own? I know all of your skills, your weaknesses, I \_am\_ you," Rill spat in James' voice.

Jessie shrieked as James' presence was blocked from her mind, and she was unable to distinguish where he was, Shadow's voice the only thing audible as her vision clouded to conceal her true cherished friend and lover. \_"Let's see you help your precious beloved now!"\_ she hissed. For the first time, Jessie felt truly afraid of the two beings, her stomach twisting as she heard metal against itself, one of the two James' touching the tip of his sword to the other.

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\_"Well, it won't be so bad, whichever James wins will get to sleep with Jessie! She is quite the arousing young woman. I wouldn't mind taking her, even if it meant by force. Or wait, I completely forgot! She'll be dead! But even then she still might be useful for a good fuck!"\_ Rill laughed to the factual person through a link to his mind as not to alert Jessie to whom he actually was. The real James closed his eyes, a fire of hate burning deep within his soul at the suggestion that Jessie would be killed, and sexual comments and insults about the woman he respected and cherished, lunging forward with a loud battle cry. "How dare you say that about my Jessie you

bastard! I'll kill you!" he shouted. The doppelganger deflected the blow easily, throwing the blades to the side roughly, the enraged James falling to the ground roughly with the force. He regained his ground quickly, and screaming furiously, abandoning the sword, he pummeled into what he knew was Rill, and knocking his false blade of the wind loose from his hand.

Jessie watched in horror as the fight became nothing more than a cruel altercation of flesh only, and winced as one of the James' landed a punch square in the other's jaw. "Jessie! I lost track of which one is our James!" Jasper whispered fearfully, "can you sense him?" She winced, and growled under her breath. "Ugh, no I can't! Shadow has his power and presence blocked from me, I don't know anymore either," she whispered mournfully, still frozen in the same spot Shadow had placed her in. Jessie glanced over to the cat, lowering her eyes in abhorrence as the feline simply smirked as one of the combatants cried out in pain, and by the looks of Shadow's expression, it seemed that it had been the real messenger of the wind.

The incapacitated young woman snarled under her breath at the sadistic beast, who merely sat and watched as the battling duo stood up suddenly, one of them with blood streaming from his nose and at the mercy of the other. "You'll never win Rill," he hissed throwing the bleeding James to the ground. "Rill!? I'm not Rill you are!" he replied, tripping the other swiftly with a deft movement of his leg. They simultaneously retrieved the analogous swords from the ground, whirling around with a scream of frustration and fury. Metal screamed in anguish as it met its own kind, both blades stopping in a disquieting stalemate. Emerald eyes met spiteful emerald eyes and tacit hatred was passed between identical merely in physical appearance winged young men. "Our skills are completely equal, there's going to be one victor, and that's whoever can predict the other's moves the best," one James said, breaking the silence and cessation of movement with a hard jab with his sword.

The other James knew that was how he usually broke free from locked situations and guarded from it, striking back with a hard blow to the side. It was blocked, and a cruel fencing battle eventuated between two natural masters of the art. Jessie and Jasper watched in terror, praying silently that the James they knew and loved would prevail, finally liberating them from the cruel despotism from Rill and Shadow. "Please James, please. I need you, don't lose now," Jessie whispered.

The battle intensified, one James crying out in pain as his back collided with the ground. The other roared in frustration, charging into to make the kill, but the James on the ground foresaw what was to come, extending his blade and drawing it swiftly and cruelly across the other's stomach. The scream of agony that resounded from deep within the soul of the slain young man as he crumpled to the ground pierced through Jessie's psyche with unmitigated force, and she knew that evil had prevailed. "NO!" was all she could manage to scream as the sadistically grinning James rose from the ground.

He kicked the body at his feet condescendingly, the sword he still clenched tightly in his hand falling to the ground with a mournful thud. He looked up to his prize, wiping the blood from his upper lip disdainfully as he turned to walk slowly toward her. "Well Jessie, you know who lost, and you should have submitted to Shadow long ago,

at least then I wouldn't have had to kill him," he said smugly. "You'll never win, even if you kill me, you'll still be stopped," Jessie replied through choked tears. "Oh? And by who? Shadow chose me as her advocate, I'm part of her now! My power is invincible!" "Invincible my ass!"

There was a brilliant glint from behind the mockery of her beloved James, and Rill's next sentence was cut short, both Jessie and Jasper gasping as the tip of a sword was suddenly thrust through his chest from behind, protruding grotesquely far for the duo to see. He screamed in pain and animosity, slicing his hands on the nimble blade as he gripped it, time seeming to stand still as the great bearer of evil and the man James had sworn revenge on finally fell, sinking to his knees in pure agony. He breathed heavily through gritted teeth in fury and pain, blood streaming from the corner of his mouth from them, and he dropped his sword as he was forced to the ground by an unseen force. "ARGH! Rill! HOW DARE YOU!" Shadow roared, suddenly springing to life from her formerly silent vigil.

Rill turned over, his sinful, stolen emerald irises fading with death as he stared the man who had finally caused his downfall in his matching eyes. "James," he hissed abhorrently. The authentic messenger smiled crookedly as he placed the already bloody blade to his doppelganger's throat, drawing a small bead of blood as he had done to him on the battlefield so long ago. "I promised I get my revenge, and this time, I do believe it's fair to kill you," he sibilated. Rill snarled in contempt, his magic fading as his appearance melded back to his own and the blood still streaming from his pierced chest. "End it, for the sake of the seven powers kill me!" he cried hoarsely.

Shadow felt her counterpart's pain, releasing her hold on Jessie with a shriek of anguish. \_"My power fades with his death, but I will still kill them both!"\_ she thought as she watched Jessie run to James' side. The winged young man didn't lift his eyes from his hated enemy, even when he felt Jessie's tender touch on his back, staring harshly with complete enmity. "You'll die in the fashion you let my Jessie die, a blade through your gut, but I won't slit your throat because, \_that\_, would be murder. I killed you in a fair fight," he hissed. Rill stifled his scream of fury as his lungs filled with blood, and he closed his hateful blue eyes for the last time. "Good riddance to a cruel, heartless bastard," James spat turning to his lover with remorse in his eyes.

She smiled warmly and embraced him lovingly, running a hand through his silky tresses reassuringly. "You did the right thing," she whispered, kissing him gently. "I know, and we're finally rid of him," he replied, smiling at the inert form of his archenemy on the ground. "But how did you do that? I thought for sure Rill had killed you!" she exclaimed, pulling away slightly to check where she had seen the blade strike. She sighed in relief as she found no wound, and knew that James was perfectly alright, hugging him tightly her body once more. "I knew he would try that, so I faked it, I stopped right in front of where I know my blade goes out to, and fell, like he had killed me. I knew Rill couldn't ever have my battling sense, so he'd walk away assuming he'd killed me, that's when I took my chance," he explained, and Jessie sighed in relief and understanding. "You're not hurt are you?" she asked tenderly. "I got a few scratches here and there, but I'll be fine," he answered, caressing Jessie's cheek gently.

Shadow seethed with fury as she felt Rill's spirit and power flee her own, but she utilized his death, capturing his spirit before it could retreat to the afterlife, and using it to build her power for one last stint in the outside world. Her eyes flared a hideous purple as she narrowed them bitterly at the young lovers standing above the body of her confidant, feeling a surge of energy within her. "They've under-estimated me for the last time! Now they both die!" she screeched, purple flames licking at her body tenaciously. Shadow's black fur stood on end as she lowered her stature to the ground, preparing the beam of pure energy that would destroy everything in its path, and her vision was blinded as it gathered in front of her in a writhing purple mass.

Jasper felt the surge from the entity, whirling around from watching his two friends tend to each other and looked on helplessly as time literally slowed, the blast of miasma rocketing forth from the cat. He forced himself to get up from the ground, feeling as if he was moving through an impermeably thick substance, assessing the situation carefully. Though his friends had not yet seen the blast, he knew that they would never be able to avoid it in time, and they would both be killed. The thought of losing them crossed his mind briefly, but in his heart he knew where his place was in the legend.

He felt in one instant the pain he had endured as a child, with parents he knew were not his own, ones that didn't really love him, and his only friends being the wildlife he'd encountered alone in the woods. He thought back to the love James had shown him, and how he knew Jessie hadn't been dead as well, and how they had helped each other through the hardships. He had befriended the elements of the legends and myths he had been told as a younger boy by his grandfather, and he remembered the words well. Jasper knew his destiny, and he set his face as he knew what he must do to fulfill his part of it. He could almost feel the power of his friends, the legendary messengers of Aradain, with him as he careened ever so slowly into the path of the beam, his expression of dignity never faltering in the face of adversity. He heard James call out his name as he finally noticed the danger, its tone dramatically lowered by the slowing of time and he closed his valiant emerald irises as the beam plowed into his body.

The pain at first was unbearable, feeling as if an unbounded number of knives had been plunged into his body at once, but it soon gave way to a relaxed, pleasant sensation of dulling senses that accompanied death. \_"Only for those I love. I sacrifice myself,"\_ he whispered longingly as the beam of light shot upward at finding its mark, forming a column of light that could be seen for great distances. The world held its breath in waiting as time finally froze from its laggard state, all eyes directed toward the great beam of light that enveloped the boy greedily. \_"It couldn't be. No one is this strong except-"\_ Shadow was cut off by the thunderous crash of the pillar of energy as it descended upon the noble, but hapless boy, exploding with a brilliant and final flash of white light.

Time surged back into motion as the attack abated, the only remnant of it a small, scorched circle on the ground where Jasper stood, eyes still shut against the fury of the psychic energy. He opened them gently as his ears no longer screamed with the roar of energy, and smiled warmly at James who looked on in horror and rushed forward,

arms outstretched toward him. "No!" he cried as the boy allowed himself to fall to the ground, the pain so intense it no longer registered in his mind, and directed his eyes toward the sky longingly as he collapsed gently onto his back.

James let the tears of sorrow fall as he dropped to his knees by his young friend's side, gathering him gently into his arms. "Jasper? Jasper no," he breathed smoothing his singed black hair away from his face. The boy squeezed his eyes shut in pain, but smiled as he held his friend in his slowly blurring vision once more. "James. At least I got to see you one last time, to say goodbye," he whispered. James was silent, and Jessie cupped her hands over her mouth in shock as she knelt by James and the mortally wounded child, placing one hand on the winged young man's shoulder reassuringly, but remaining silent. "How could Shadow do this? How could she murder an innocent little boy?" James asked tearfully, stroking Jasper's cheek affectionately. He closed his eyes at the pleasant sensation, placing his own hand over James' reassuringly. "Don't be sad James, in a weird way, this is what I always wanted. I wanted to do something so great, I'd be remembered forever for it, and now I know I have," he whispered weakly.

James held the boy close, his labored breathing growing shallower as the precious minutes slipped away into nothingness. "Y-You told her you love her?" he asked looking up to James. "He did Jasper, and I love him back, and we're even getting married after we're free," Jessie assured him, taking his battered hand tenderly into hers. "Good. I'm just sorry I won't be there to see it," he replied, wincing in pain. "Shhh, don't talk Jasper, just rest easy," James hushed. "I-it's hard to breathe," the child gasped quietly, his eyes never leaving his older friend, "b-but I m-might as well use my last breath to say. G-goodbye."

A sob escaped James' throat as the youthful emerald irises clouded with pain and death, holding him as close as he possibly could, never wanting to let go. "Never say goodbye kid, you only say goodbye if you're never going to see someone again, and we all end up in the same place," he whispered. Jessie let her own tears fall as she recalled the same words James had said to her before she died, and knowing that he would have to bid his young friend a final farewell. "I always considered you more of a father to me than my real one, and thank you for showing me what it felt like to be truly loved for once in my life," Jasper whispered quietly. "Anytime kid, and I considered you to be a son to me Jasper, and I'll always remember what it feels like to love someone like that," he replied. Jasper moaned in pain, opening his eyes furiously to stay in the mortal realm long enough to bid farewell to those he loved. "Goodbye James, Jessie," he whispered nearly inaudibly. "I love you kid, and until we meet again, goodbye Jasper," James replied.

Upon hearing James' final words, Jasper smiled, closing his emerald eyes for the last time, and drew one final, shaky breath, exhaling peacefully before gently going flaccid in his friend's arms. "Please no," Jessie breathed. The winged young man stared hard at the body of the little boy in his arms for only a moment before stroking the side of his face lovingly, wiping his own tears from the pale cheeks. "No," he whispered mournfully, "Jasper! Please don't, Jasper." James held his friend close, knowing he was gone, and kissing his still warm with life, forehead lovingly, crying silently for the loss of the boy he had treasured so deeply.

Jessie cried along with her friend and beloved, but drew her sword furiously, standing to face the malicious cat. "Damn you!" she screeched, "how can you do something like that with a clear conscience?" Shadow merely smirked, flicking her tail nonchalantly. "I enjoy causing pain, it weakens the spirit, makes it easier to take!" she explained with relish. "You, Shadow, have hurt me and the people I love for the last time!" Jessie shouted, raising a hand to gather a bolt of energy. She fired it with a vengeance, missing the feline who dodged it artfully. "You'll have to do better than that!" Shadow retorted sending her own blast back. Jessie deflected it with a swift movement of her sword, lunging forward with a scream of aggression as a fierce battle ensued.

The fight became white noise in James' ears, oblivious to everything but his sorrow, and the death of his young friend. "You sacrificed yourself for me, and my Jessie. You did so much for me and I did so little for you, I'm so sorry Jasper, please forgive me," he whispered tearfully. \_"Don't be sorry."\_ James looked up instantly at hearing a very familiar disembodied voice, searching with wild emerald eyes for what had created it. "J-Jasper?" he cried hoarsely. \_"Please don't cry James, you loved me, and that's all I needed."\_ James laid the body down, crossing his arms across his chest respectfully and smiled. "I just wish you could be here with me," he replied mournfully. \_"I'll always be with you James, just as long as you believe."\_

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A light and gentle wind tossed James' shoulder length blue hair about his face playfully in comfort, and he closed his eyes at the familiar sensation. "Goodbye kid, I'll always remember you, and I'll always believe," he said quietly\_. "It's never goodbye forever, and never forget me." \_ "Never Jasper, I will always remember you," James said, his determined tone reassuring to himself.

The peace was to be short lived, for James' attention was forced away by a shriek of pain from Jessie and a victorious yowl from the sadistic feline. "Jess?" he cried as she stumbled backwards, clutching her side in agony. He stood to catch her as she fell, letting her collapse into his arms and easing her to the ground tenderly. No! Jessie are you okay?" he asked, deeply concerned. She groaned as she removed her hands from her side, revealing a singed and burnt mark across it where she had fallen victim to a psychic bolt from Shadow. "It's not bad, I'll be okay," she assured him, turning her spiteful gaze back to Shadow.

The beast lowered her head in contempt, slowly slinking forward toward the terrified duo in the ground, merely smiling as they embraced each other lovingly for the last time. "Well, if you must die, I suppose in each other's arms is best, no?" she mused cruelly. Jessie and James looked away, knowing that the cat had won, and there was no way they could escape from her now. "We're no match for her James, even together, her mind is too powerful," Jessie whispered, closing her eyes as she felt James' forehead against her own. "I know Jess, I doubt the seven messengers combined could beat her, but we tried our best, and at least we go out together," he replied.

Jessie smiled at the reassuring words from her friend and lover, holding him tightly and pressing her lips to his in a brief kiss. "I

love you," she whispered. James closed his eyes returning the affectionate gesture, and turned his head completely away from Shadow, not wanting to see the attack that would end their lives. "And I love you," he replied with an amiable smile. Jessie smiled as well hearing James tell her again he loved her, and was comforted by his words. "Let's not say goodbye," she started, hoping James would remember the phrase they had affectionately come up with long ago. "Let's just say, we're gonna die," he replied with a small chuckle.

Jessie chuckled as well, but her face fell as she heard the wail of energy gathering from where she knew Shadow was, and sensed the power about her. "You remembered," she breathed fondly. "Of course, I almost told you I loved you then," James replied, to which Jessie sighed deeply. "I wish we could have been together for longer before. Before this," she said distastefully. "Yeah, me too, but at least now we'll be together forever, just like we promised," James said, turning over his palm for Jessie to see the scar from the blood pact they had made in school. Jessie stifled her tears and slid the same hand that bore her scar into his, kissing the back of it gently. "Forever and a day, James," she whispered lovingly. "Very touching! But now you die!" Shadow interrupted, shrieking shrilly, and both Jessie and James looked away, dignified in their last moments.

They heard the hiss from the cat as the deathblow was fired, and the roar of pure and unrefined psychic energy the only sound audible aside from their own heartbeats. "James," Jessie moaned, clutching him tightly. "Look away Jess, and don't let go of me," he said firmly. "I'll never let go, as long as you hold onto me," she answered and pressed her lips to his one last time. The kiss did not break away, even as they both felt a surge of white energy from behind them, and a great rush of wind accompanied by a shrill war cry. They knew nothing but each other, facing the concept of their deaths with bravery and love, never wanting to let go, and knowing neither of them would.

They felt so strongly the bond of their mutual soul together, that they would not allow anything to tear it apart. They were meant to be together, destined long before they had even been born to find each other and complete the one beautiful soul created for them to share forever. Through adversity, triumph and sorrow, they had managed to stay with each other, their love growing secretly, but true and unconditional despite the fact that neither had the courage to admit it. Their lives finally felt complete now that they had confessed, and given themselves to one another with a physical, mental and passionate promise to love and cherish each other for eternity and eons to come. These thoughts, feelings, and love were with the two souls as the passionate kiss deepened, and they felt the beam approach them, their grip on one another so tight it began to be excruciating. They braced themselves for the inevitable pain, ready to perish with no fear in their hearts, but contrary to what was expected, over the deafening roar there rose a gorgeous note.

It began as a soft harmony, delighting the ears and senses with a sensual play of whimsical tones and instruments, rising to a valiant crescendo when the beam struck, but the soulful kiss finally broke away when they felt no pain. The lovers retained their hold on one another, the gorgeous song filling their senses as they witnessed the deep purple beam deflect off of a vague figure, sending a shower of the energy about them harmlessly.



James gasped and looked down to the scarred hand that was still in Jessie's, resisting the urge to separate them as they glowed softly with a white and purple light, respective to their powers. He felt Jessie tighten her grip on the same hand as she too noticed the strange phenomenon, looking deeply into James' emerald eyes before turning to face the figure that averted their demise. \_"It is not yet time for you to leave this mortal realm,"\_ it said, seeming to speak with a gentle and oddly comforting voice.

Shadow snarled in contempt as her attack failed, diminishing completely with one last screech of defiance. The remaining weak and sickly purple mist coiled lazily away, revealing a white pillar of energy in its wake, standing protectively in front of the duo on the ground. "What?!" was Shadow's only response, "impossible!" "Believe it you cowardly tyrant," the entity snarled, lifting itself from the ground with a rush of sweetly scented air.

It performed a lissome flip midair, slowly materializing into the form of a great bird, white energy spilling over every curve of the glistening wings and the blade-like crest atop its head as it rocketed from the sky to land a mere feet in front of the feline, spreading its wings with a shrill battle cry. "I won't let you hurt them," it said in a deep and triumphant masculine voice. Shadow backed away, obviously afraid of the powerful creature that stood in front of her, letting her spiteful purple eyes take in every detail of the beast, not believing what it was.

She recognized the white, metal like feathers that hissed as the creature opened them, lowering its head in challenge, and the fierce talons that glinted even in what little light there was. The entire creature looked to be made of metal, save for the long, elegantly coiled tail that bore a striking resemblance to the one James had inherited with his power of the wind. The blade-like crests adorning its head flexed in anticipation, and the bird opened its beak menacingly at the cat, scrutinizing her with serious and wise eyes. "Don't believe Shadow? Well how about this?" it asked in the same distinctly male voice, bringing a wingtip to his chest, pulling aside a few feathers to reveal a medallion not unlike the one Shadow possessed. She yowled disdainfully at it instantly, recognizing the symbol of the wind emblazoned in white enamel in the gold, her tail flicking furiously. "Blade, power of the wind" she hissed rancorously, which drew a collective gasp from Jessie, James, and the rest of the messengers who looked on in horror.

Blade folded his wings back in respectfully, grinning, and rose to his full height in mockery of the sadistic cat at his feet. "So Shadow, power of the mind, we meet again, and killing off the messengers for energy? You really have sunk to a new low!" he said vindictively. "I did not have any other choice! I was sealed in Shadowrun with a powerful spell, I needed the girl's soul to break it! She tainted it with love, taking your messenger to her bed, so now I need both her, and her precious lover!" she replied, black fur bristling with anger.

She unsheathed a set of deadly looking claws, raising them defensively to the composed and calm Blade. "Actually it was my messenger who took her to his bed, and I respect their love, but you forget, the young woman is your messenger," he answered. "I'm aware of that, but why should I take part in the liberation of Aradain when

I myself seek to rule it?" the cat said lunging at Blade. The attack came too swiftly for the power of the wind, and he was barely able to escape a serious injury, the claws merely raking across the seemingly metallic feathers.

He rose to the challenge, crying out a challenge to the skies and winds, spreading his fiercely razor like wings to their full length as he lifted himself into the air. "You've been corrupted, just as the rest of the powers! Ichtsique has already fallen, and so shall we!" he cried, swooping down and raking his claws across Shadow's back.

She yowled in pain, ignoring the black blood that streamed down her side, and retaliated quickly with a furious slash to Blade's chest, tearing through the defense of the feathers to the flesh underneath. The bird barely flinched, but was forced to land, spiteful eyes narrowed to an abhorrent level at his adversary. "You can't win against me Shadow. You can tear families apart, you can ravage cities, you can murder innocent children, but you can never defeat me, or the power of the love between the messengers of the mind and wind!" he spat cruelly.

Shadow thought for a moment, and smiled wickedly, showing both rows of perfectly white and cruel teeth. "They may be soul mates, and that may be a rarity, but they are still only human!" she sibilated, lunging forward into the battle again. She caught the wounded Blade off-guard, tearing into soft flesh as she forced him to the ground, squalling in pain and anger. He forced the cat off of him with a vengeful kick to the stomach, utilizing the presence of his talons artfully. He took to the air after that with a flurry of blood and razor-like feathers, screeching his plight to the winds.

Jessie and James cowered in the presence of the two battling powers of Aradain, holding each other tightly in comfort. "Where did my power come from? And am I going nuts or did Shadow just say we're-" James started, too shocked to finish. "Soul mates?" Jessie stated flatly, turning to her friend and lover. He smiled broadly, raising their still glowing hands to eye level. "I think this speaks for itself," he said softly. "I always knew I was meant to be with you," Jessie replied warmly. "I love you Jessie," James said, their hands pulsating with the sounds of the battle and growing in intensity and magnitude as he leaned forward, closing his eyes wistfully. "I love you too James," she replied, pressing her lips to his passionately, their joined hands flaring with an depth that mirrored the calenture in the kiss that demanded the attention of even Blade and Shadow.

They stopped their battle, staring in awe as the duo was completely enveloped in a brilliant white light, one half of it darkening into a deep purple. The two intermingled perfectly, playing with each other in an ethereal dance of the legends forged by the ancestors of the two long time friends. Shadow felt a sudden sense of peace with it, wrapping her tail about her legs as she felt the impending escalation of power. "The legends were correct Blade, the messengers will be our downfall and rebirth into the equitable minds we were created with," she breathed closing her eyes as she felt the choking power that Jessie possessed intermingle with her mind, and surge throughout her body. Blade shrieked as he felt the same, merely white in color energy surge from James. "They're much more powerful than we gave them credit for," he said with difficulty, beginning to illuminate a

brilliant white himself. "Not them, they're not two people, but one, it took each other for them to realize the power they have inside of themselves, and that they share one soul," Shadow managed as her body illuminated purple. "I-I always knew how strong James was, and I always knew he was destined to be with Jessie, and now I finally know why. Thank you, James, my angel," Blade whispered as his final thoughts before he felt the impact of the full power of the legendary messengers of Aradain.

The rest of the messengers looked on in consternation as the dome that Shadow had encased the combatants in shattered with the force of the energy, exploding with millions of tiny glowing fragments that whizzed harmlessly through the air, only to disappear. The area flared with an intense light for only a moment before dying down, leaving a scant circle mark in the ground, and a very stunned looking Jessie and James, and not trace of the cat and bird that had nearly killed everyone inside.

They pulled slightly away from each other as they realized the tranquility of the world, looking at their surroundings as the mutual grin widened. They met each other's eyes only briefly before they exploded into a fit of overjoyed laughter at their victory. "Jess, you did it!" James cried, throwing his arms around his beloved, free at last to love her and be happy. She returned the gesture, laughing joyously with him as they fell to the ground in euphoria. "No James! I didn't, we did! We both did it!" she answered ruffling his hair affectionately. He closed his eyes happily, kissing her quickly and sighed contentedly. "Oh Jessie, I never believed in myself until this whole Shadow thing, and now I know why it happened, and I know that we'll both be happy forever," he breathed, settling into her arms. "It was meant to be, and so are we," Jessie smirked at her impromptu rhyme, looking up only when she heard the exuberant shouts of their companions.

The duo sat up as they heard them approach, and weren't able to get anything said before they suddenly found themselves in the arms of the rest of the messengers, amidst tears of joy and indiscernible shouts of praise and relief. "You're okay! I knew you guys would pull through! I just knew it!" Misty cried. "And I knew youse two would finally stop beatin' around da bush about how much ya love each odda!" Meowth added leaping into James' lap. Jessie chuckled and patted the feline affectionately. "I hope you don't mind your old team mates and friends being in love!" she mused fondly.

The congratulations and ovation were white noise in Ash's ears as he looked lovingly to James. He had seen him in his darkest hour, and watched him prevail, the outcome the one he knew was destined to be, and would make his winged friend happy for eternity. He felt an odd closeness to both Jessie and James he hadn't before, and now that their souls were joined in passion and respect, that the group would be even closer to one another. "I knew you could do it James," he said quietly, at length, placing a hand on James' shoulder. The blue-haired youth winked furtively at him, and smiled warmly, remembering that Ash had been the only person who had known that he had loved Jessie for as long as he had. His smile broadened as Brock embraced both lovers at once one last time idolatrously before standing and clearing his throat, gaining the undivided attention of the entire group. "I'm glad you two found each other, but you really do have a lot of explaining to do," he commented once the reunion had calmed down some.

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"Jessie, James." The disembodied voices startled all present, and the two messengers that had been called stood instantly. "That sounded like James come on!" Jessie said snatching his hand to lead him behind her. The white and purple points of light directed them to the sources of the voice, and they sprinted to the center of the vague circle in the ground.

They stopped when they came upon two crystal figures in the grass, both falling to their knees in front of them as they recognized the intricately carved figures, gasping in awe, and consternation. One was made of clear stone, crafted in the exact likeness of Blade, the other of a purple variety, shaped precisely like the cat that had caused the entire adventure. "I believe we have some explaining to do as well," the figure of Blade said softly, pulsating with a warm white light as James gathered it gently from the ground. "Yes, you do," he replied.

He heard the great bird sigh, and Jessie picked up the figure of Shadow distastefully, the expression on her embittered face one of utter resentment and hatred. "I'm sorry Jessie," she said, "please let me explain now that I'm at peace again." The psychic young woman ran a hand down the sinewy back of the purple crystal, a sudden maternal feeling for the power of her abilities sweeping over her warmly. "Go ahead Shadow, I think we'd all like some clarification here," she said placing her back on the ground. "Very well, all of you shall hear the tale," Shadow said reverently, and flashed brightly.

The messengers found themselves blinded for only a moment before their visions swirled with color, forming into various objects and scenes they were not familiar with, but they were forced into silence as they heard Shadow's reverent voice begin the tale, and watched as the visions performed it for them in their own minds.

"Long ago, when the great sorcerer first created the powers, he crafted them with the ultimate power over their element. We prevailed in an epic battle against the oppression of the world, but our lust for control over all the elements of the world grew strong. Fights and more battles ensued, and the powers were nearly destroyed, but our spirits were able to be contained, sent to different areas of the world to be awakened should the need arise, and he wrote the seven scrolls with allusions to where they lie, and how to tame their wild spirits. But I was a bit different. My powers of the mind grew so intense, I corrupted my own, and was unable to control it any longer. I became vengeful, and broke free of my prison where the wise sorcerer had sealed me eons before. I killed mercilessly and constantly, seeking to rule Aradain myself, and I became obsessed. There was another, when the world cried out for retribution, a powerful being who was able to create Shadowrun, where she bound me with a spell. The only way I could break that was with the power of emotions and magic and such, of human souls. Yours is extremely powerful Jessica, your brilliantly bright love and passion for James, the deeply rooted affection and unconditional friendship with the other messengers, and the intense power of the mind you received made it optimal for me to release myself from my binds, so I discovered the heathen Rill. He believed not in the power of the legends and myths, but in the power of the sword, and gaining ultimate control

over Aradain. He joined the alliance army because of it, volunteered himself to my service and I used him to achieve my goals. I'm glad James was able to kill him, for his heart was black, and such people do not belong in the serene world of Aradain we hope to consummate. Now that I am once again the sane power of the mind, I can see the golden light of Jessica's and James' hearts joined together, and I know that it is truly meant to be. You two are written into the stars as soul mates, and your love will never falter. It is rare indeed that soul mates find one another, but since the seven messengers lives are the ones most deeply interlaced with the legends, it was written long ago for it to happen."

The group's visions faded as the theatrical storytelling ended, and Jessie reached forward quickly, snatching the crystal figure of Shadow from the ground lovingly in her arms. "Thank you Shadow, I know now why this happened, and my life is a thousand times better for it," she whispered. "My power grows weak, I must return to my dormancy to await the time when I shall do battle with the evil Vinetra alongside my friends the seven powers again, but you must know something," she replied. "I need to know more about the legends! Was my little Jasper a part of them?" James piped suddenly, anxious for closure before the spirits left as Icthsique eventually had. "Don't you recognize me James? My savior? My very own angel?" James' breath caught in his chest as the white crystal that was Blade spoke to him.

He reached out to it, almost afraid of it, and drew back as his hand nearly touched it's slick surface. "It can't be," he breathed, cupping a hand over his mouth. "It's nice to see you again old friend," Blade said fondly. James fought back his threatening tears and smiled broadly, cradling his crystal into his arms as Jessie had done. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asked softly. "I didn't know, it took the incredible poignancy of seeing you about to be killed for me to realize how deeply my life was entwined with the legends. I was right when I said my parents were not my own, I was created as Blade, power of the wind eons ago, but unlike my comrades, when I began to sense my mind slipping into the power starved rages of the others, I concentrated my power to form a little boy with the same emerald eyes the legends foretold for my messenger. I knew I would find him when I saw them, and I knew you were special when I met you, but when I was an infant, I underestimated the innocence of children, and I forgot whom I was. I grew up Jasper, knowing nothing but his life, and of the rebel leaders Aaron and Rhianna. My grandfather was a descendant of the sorceress that contained Shadow, and he knew the myths. I knew my life would change when he was killed, but I didn't know how, as I always felt an odd connection to the myths and legends, and until today, I had no clue why. I could always speak to birds, which are the very spirit of the wind themselves. They've been in touch with its power for longer even than I have, and they gave me guidance, which is what I was destined to do for you. I created the boy, and named him Jasper, after the very powerful stone, which has the power to protect against unseen entities, such as Shadow, to stabilize emotions, and to deal with heavy negativity, such as your loss of Jessie. It even has the health aid of protection, and to reduce fears and insecurities, such as yours about being a coward, and too weak to rescue your friend. I still love you James, you're the bravest person I've ever known in my life, and I'll always be looking over you, even though now I must lie dormant like Shadow and Icthsique, but I will rise again, and that time, it will be to vanquish the ultimate evil by your side."

James wiped the tears from his eyes, finally understanding everything about the journey, and about the odd little boy he had loved so dearly. "I'm looking forward to it Jasper, Blade, power of the wind, my friend," he whispered reverently. "Good luck in all your future endeavors my friends, and beware, not everything is what it seems, your next adventure draws near, and I fear it will be a difficult one," he replied as Shadow's glow disappeared completely and his faded. "I'll never forget you, or anything that happened," James assured him. "But there is something you, Meowth and Jessie do wish to forget, and though I wish I could erase the past or even your memories of it, I can't, but I can do a small kindness to help you always remember that you have overcome it, and it will never haunt you again," Blade said carefully.

James felt his stomach twist in anticipation at this, knowing that the power meant the hell he and Jessie had gone through in Team Rocket and wondering what he could possibly do help. "What are you going to do to us?" Jessie spoke up, obviously thinking along the same lines as her beloved. "Nothing harmful I assure you, but it's the least I could do after all you did for me. I'm going to take the scars of your past, the physical ones, as I know they are a daily reminder of events you mutually sorely wish hadn't happened. For Jessie, though I can't take the scars and wounds from your mother's death, the scars from Giovanni's harsh words and Team Rocket in general, or even the ones from nearly losing your James, but I can take the imperfections from your back, as I can see you have a deep interlacing of scars there from a severe whipping," Blade said mournfully. Jessie forced back her tears, nodding dumbly as she felt James gingerly run a hand along the pathways he knew the white pattern took. She closed her eyes reverently as she felt the warm, tingling sensation of the healing, smiling in gratitude and knowing they were gone, along with the wound Shadow had given her just moments before. "Thank you so much, that means so much to me, and James," she said quietly. "I know, and from James, I take a bit more. I cannot heal the still open wounds from your family, but I will take the lashing scars that your fianc  gave you, and as well as Giovanni. I also take the scars from the wound in your shoulder, the one I healed without knowing it, and the one you received in Team Rocket. Most importantly, I take the scars from your hand, the ones that most poignantly remind you of painful events," Blade explained. James gasped and looked down to the hand in question, smiling broadly in gratitude, joy, and at the memories that would no longer haunt him as the scars glowed gently for only a moment and were gone, leaving only perfect flesh.

"Oh James," Jessie breathed as he showed it to her. He wrapped his arms about her lovingly, running his hand tenderly down her healed back and smiling in pure ecstasy and joy. "Thank you so much Jasper, I can never thank you enough," he whispered. "Your friendship and paternal love was all I needed, ever James, but now I fear my power is nearly taken up entirely into reserve, and I must go now," Blade answered. James eased himself out of Jessie's arms and to the crystal, running a hand down its spine affectionately. "Goodbye kid," he said fondly, bidding a final farewell to his friend. "It's never goodbye forever remember? Until we meet again James," were the final words from the entity before it too, withered and became an inert white crystal.

James held his crystal close, smiling warmly as he finally felt true

happiness, and Jessie's tender embrace about his shoulders. "It's finally over Jess, we're finally free," he whispered joyously, returning the affectionate gesture. "I know James, I know," she replied smiling broadly.

They sat there in each other's arms for as long as they could, each never wanting to let go again, and knowing they neither would, nor have to. The whole circumstance involving Jessie's death and liberation from Shadow had drawn them indefinitely close, and they both felt the bond between their souls that they were positive would never be broken. They held each other as the black clouds lifted with a cleansing mist of rain, spreading a gorgeous arc of color over the now peaceful scenery, and illuminating the symbolic rosebush that James had planted. They stood up at last, smiling warmly, their hands entwined with one another's, and staring off into the beautiful sun sinking below the crest of the same hill to engulf the ever-growing bush in a crimson beacon of flame. The rest of the messengers joined them with mirrored smiles, feeling the same reassuring surge of power they always felt when they were together, and placing arms about each other.

Another chapter of their adventure in the fantasy and fickle world of Aradain was over, but their saga was still far from completion. They now had three of the seven great powers that would liberate it for all time, and Jessie and James had finally found everything they wanted to love in each other. No more explanation was needed, and all were pleasantly silent as they turned to return to the palace, picking up the crystals to lay to rest with Icthsique in the ceremonial room, but James insisted on bringing the body of the little boy he had treasured, intending fully on giving him a proper burial. They knew that another break was in store for them just as they had before the fateful battle, but just as Icthsique had warned them that the Shadowrun events would happen, Blade had warned them another would occur, and that it would be difficult. They cared not what the power had said, as they had a wedding to prepare for, and they knew in their hearts that they would meet any adversary with confidence, fearlessness, love, true friendship, and pride in their hearts. All evil would falter and fall at their hands, but most importantly, they knew they would prevail, and they would always do it together.

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## 12. Default Chapter Title

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The Myth of Shadowrun

Epilogue

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The sun shone brightly through a cloudless sky that day, at first touching the beaches of the Neonthian shore furtively, and deciding that the landscape would do no harm, bathed them in it's full splendor. It then chose to pour over the mountains that guarded the pure white sands of the beaches and over the small community of Shadow River, where the people were just beginning to regain a hold

on life, and there was more smoke gushing merrily in the early morning light than ever before. It continued over the forests dividing the area between Vertigo and the smaller town, rousing diurnal Pokemon from their slumber and lulling nocturnal varieties to sleep. It gained speed as it picked up on the sounds of merriment coming from the palace and day broke fully upon the land to the pleasant sight of a gathering of people in the gorgeous gardens in the back of the ancient castle.

They awaited the return of their messengers, long since departed for a secretive ceremony on the beach, consisting of the mere seven of them, the dragon Riley, and Princess Cerise. They had crossed the town which rested on the docks and ventured past the guarding of tall stone spires of natural rock formations and to a secluded and beautiful area of the beach where few took the time to wander.

Jessie and James stood in elaborate ceremonial garb at the top of the highest cliff on the shore, the friendly and exuberant winds tossing their hair and decorative capes about their statures adoringly. Their mood mirrored the same joy their messenger felt as he took his soul mate's hands into his, gazing with pure love into her glimmering azure eyes. They barely heard the ceremony's words from princess Cerise, listening only when it came time for the actual holy bond to be complete. "For the final completion of the rite, you must each give each other your prepared signs of eternal love, only then may you be pronounced husband and wife," Cerise proclaimed aristocratically.

Jessie kissed James' hand gingerly, letting it go as she raised both of her index fingers to rest on his temples. He accepted her silent request to proceed before he did, closing his eyes at her tender touch. He felt tears of joy sting his eyes as the night they had spent together played back in his mind, as vividly and as full of passion as it had been during the actual event. Everything else about him faded into oblivion as he knew what Jessie had prepared for him, and that she had consigned it in her memory as resplendently as he saw it and it would remain intact forever, opening his eyes when it was over to throw his arms around her. "Oh Jess." Was all he could manage to say as she returned the embrace. "They say you never forget the first time, but now neither of us will, literally," she assured him with a gentle smile.

They kissed lightly, much to the delight of the rest of the messengers, and Cerise waited, a small smile playing on even her cynical lips at the couple even she had to admit was perfect. Misty stifled a sob, leaning on Ash's shoulder with it, and wiping her tearful eyes on his tunic. "What's your problem?" he asked quietly. "I.I always cry at weddings!" she wailed in response. Ash sighed deeply and patted her reassuringly on the back, wiping the tears from her cheeks tenderly as the ceremony continued.

Cerise cleared her throat, gaining the attention of the two lovers before her, and with an amiable smile, motioned to James. "And now James, with your show of pure love, your union will be complete in the heavens, and on earth, let it be known to the world of your harmony," she said softly. James nodded, and turned to the beach, closing his eyes to speak to the winds.

The young man spread his shimmering blue wings slightly to welcome



the wind into them, lowering his head in respect for the element he received his power from. They answered his call, tossing his hair and feathers lightly as they performed his bidding, calling forth a distant rainstorm. It gathered quickly, a single hole in the pleasantly gray mass casting an ethereal beam of golden light upon the two messengers as a light mist of rain began to fall. James smiled broadly as he raised his head, silently thanking the winds and turning back to Jessie. "Look up Jess," he encouraged, cupping her chin in his hand gently.

She smiled adoringly at him before he turned her head to the skies, blinking back her own tears of happiness as a wide arc of a rainbow appeared in the sky above them, engulfing them in its full spectrum of color. "James, it's beautiful," she breathed. "But you put it all to shame," he said quietly. Jessie laughed lightly, cocking her head to one side thoughtfully as she caressed James' cheek tenderly. "I'm so glad I found you," she said. "It was meant to be, just like everything in our life," James replied. "Think my mom knows how happy you've made me?" Jessie asked, wrapping her arms about his neck. "I'm positive she knows, think she likes me?" James replied with a smirk. "I'm positive. I love you James," she replied, resting her cheek against his. "I love you too," he whispered.

All present ignored the rain that soaked their garments as Jessie and James' lips met in their first kiss as husband and wife, Cerise closing the book she read the ceremony out of decisively. "I now pronounce you, joined in the holy union ordained long ago by our ancestors, as one soul shared, husband, and wife," she said reverently, curtsying delicately to conclude the ritual. A cheer of approval rose from the soaking wet messengers as the kiss slowly broke away, and Jessie and James remained standing, gazing into each other's eyes with nothing but love behind them, and burning deep within their souls.

They were their own family that they had never had as children, and that they had always known on a subconscious level. It took a near tragedy, and a lengthy adventure and contentions with corrupted and omnipotent forces for them to finally gather the courage to admit to each other exactly how much they loved and needed each other. They were finally joined completely, and as the group turned to attend the festival they had planned for the occasion in the town of Vertigo, they knew that though their saga in the great, never-ending story of the world of Aradain was over, but the journeys, trials and tribulations of the seven legendary messengers, were far from completion.

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The celebration in town lasted all that day, and well into the night, as the people had much to rejoice over. They were two steps closer to complete freedom, and there had been a holy union of two of their beloved messengers that day, what wasn't there cause to be joyous about? The town center was the main pulse of the festivities, with food, drink, music and color everywhere one turned. The messengers sat at a long wooden table, absolutely covered in an assortment of foods and elaborate centerpieces crafted from native materials, most of them pertaining to the elegant wind and wing symbols, as well as the eye and dizzying spirals associated with the powers of the mind and wind. Chat was peaceful and lighthearted, as everyone was in the highest spirits they had been in far too long. Even James, who had

just lost Jasper, was his usual self, smiling crookedly at his beloved as a particularly upbeat rhythm resounded from the band. Struck with inspiration, he stood suddenly, demanding the attention from the rest of the messengers and the townspeople seated with them.

Jessie gasped as James suddenly grabbed her hand, leading her into the congregation of people in front of the small orchestra and as he twirled her elegantly into his arms, she made a shocking discovery. James could dance, and he could dance amazingly well. They spent the entire evening in each other's arms, ending it when they decided to take a walk along the beach by the Vertigan docks where their adventures in the town had begun when Raine had dropped them off in the Virtue. They wondered what fate had befallen to their old friend, and hoped that she had run the valiant ship well, and had also taken care of the amorous Captain Roker.

The lovers talked happily as they strayed far from the festivity of Vertigo, the music and shouts of enjoyment growing ever fainter in their ears. They stopped regretfully only when the sounds of the town were no longer audible, the only evidence of life far along the shore the warm glow emanating from the general vicinity of their beloved town. "I suppose we should go back, it is our party after all," Jessie said, looking back. James merely sighed in response, gingerly taking Jessie's hand into his, and cast her a furtive look out of the corner of his eyes. "I don't really feel like going back, how about we chase the stars?" he asked softly. "Now that is an idea," Jessie replied as she allowed James to tenderly lift her into his arms.

He spread his wings, taking flight into the clear night sky and smiled, both with the same joy he always felt while flying, and that now he had finally taken the one person he'd always wanted to with him. He remembered when he had thought to himself what it would be like to fly with Jessie resting comfortably and lovingly in his arms, arms wrapped securely about his neck as he soared victoriously above the landscape, and now that he knew, it was indefinitely better in real life than in his imagination.

He felt Jessie's lips touch his cheek gently, and he closed his eyes happily for only a brief moment before rocketing downward from the sky, brushing over the surface of the water. It sprayed about them with a sudden rush of air, enveloping the duo in a curtain of water that gorgeously reflected the pallid silver and light red moonlight. They laughed in unison with the spray, James' flight carrying them to the top of a serene dune which was covered in low, sparse grass and a gentle coating of pure white sand.

The winged young man lighted there with a kind-hearted smile, gently placing Jessie on the ground to sit by her side. She sighed as he wrapped his arm about her waist, closing her eyes happily as she rested her head against his affectionately. "Well James, we finally got what we wanted," she breathed. "I know, and I'm happier than I've ever been in my life," he replied. Jessie smiled at this, turning her gaze to the stars wistfully. "Think we would have admitted it if we hadn't come to Aradain?" she asked absent-mindedly.

James shrugged, lying backwards and taking Jessie with him to simply gaze into the beautiful and pure heavens of the fantasy world. She pressed herself further into his body as he did so, wrapping her arms about his shoulders as she kissed him lightly. "Probably not, I felt

so insecure about myself, it took this little misadventure to make me realize who I am, and that contrary to popular belief I'm not as cowardly and stupid as I thought I was," he answered with an affable smirk. "You never were, I blame those idiots who dared call themselves loving parents, I'll never forgive them for what they did to you," Jessie hissed, the image of James' sadistic family coming to mind. "That's all behind us Jess, all the family I want is here," he said lovingly.

Jessie nodded in understanding, feeling the same love for her friends James did, as she too had be without a biological family for most of her life. James and Meowth had filled the void that her mother had left in her heart, and now, she and James legally were family. "Me too, and I promise right now, together forever James, I love you more than life itself," she replied. "Forever Jessie, forever and an eternity."

Nothing more was said as the couple held each other close, gazing into the stars, and praising whatever omnipotent force had allowed them to find their soul mates. It had been a hard journey, full of heartbreak and self discovery, but Jessie and James had grown impeccably stronger and closer to one another in effect. Jessie finally found someone she knew she could trust her heart to, and James found himself, as well as his one true love. They had finally been able to put their painful pasts behind and forget about them, knowing only their blissful present, and eagerly awaiting what was impending for the future. They knew many hardships were eminent, and Jessie could already sense the power dwelling within their next adventure, but for the time being they were content to be with each other. The darkness had finally been defeated, in the lover's souls, the world, and in the hearts of those who would always believe in the legends and myths of Aradain.

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